

BIG NOVELS BY 2 TOP-HAND AUTHORS!

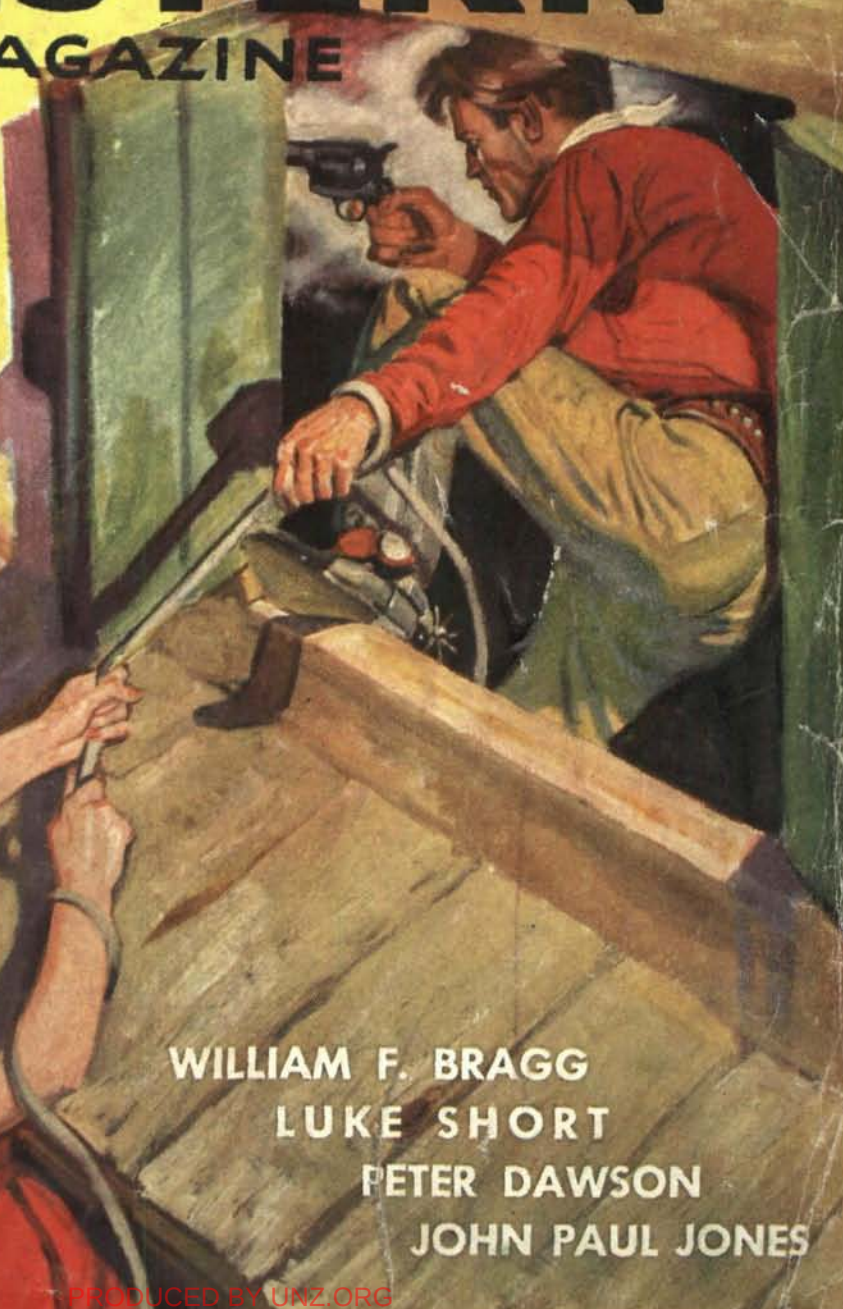
AR. — APR.



BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

**BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL
OUTCAST'S DOOM
PATROL**

by **L. P. HOLMES**



**WILLIAM F. BRAGG
LUKE SHORT
PETER DAWSON
JOHN PAUL JONES**

The TRUE EXPERIENCE of PAUL SHEA

OF SPRINGFIELD, N.J.

I HATE TAKING THIS FACE ANYWHERE!

SURE WISH I COULD
BACK OUT OF REHEARSAL
TONIGHT—THESE PIMPLES
LOOK FIERCE!

READ
PAUL'S
OWN
STORY



CAMON FELLERS—LET'S TRY THAT
OVER—YOU'LL HAVE TO GIVE IT
MORE ZIP IF WE'RE GOING
TO GET THAT RADIO
TRY-OUT
A NOTE!



FOR GOODNESS SAKE
PAUL—WHAT'S GOT
INTO YOU LATELY—I
NEVER KNEW YOU
TO SIT AROUND
HOME THIS
WAY—DON'T
YOU FEEL
WELL?

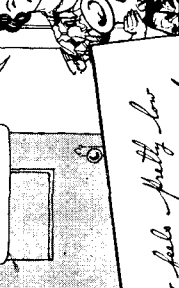


I WONDER IF FLEISCHMANN'S YEAST WOULDN'T
HELP YOU? I'M GOING TO GET YOU SOME—
IT'S WHAT A SKIN DOCTOR TOLD LAURA
TO EAT—AND SHE SAID IT WAS
WONDERFUL



IT SURE IS
WONDERFUL IF
IT REALLY WORKS

ALL READY, SON?
DAD SAYS 'HELL
DRIVE US OVER TO
—THAT RADIO
AUDITION



O.K.—SAY, MUM—THOSE
YEAST CAKES ARE THE STUFF
ALL RIGHT—LOOK—THERE'S
NOT A HICKIE LEFT—



PAUL, YOU WERE
SWELL—I NEVER
HEARD YOU PLAY
BETTER
THANKS—I TRIED MY
DARNDDEST—GEE—
I SURE HOPE WE
SOUNDED ALL RIGHT
IN THAT MIKE



"THE WAY I LOOKED BE-
FORE I took Fleischmann's
Yeast, I hated going any-
where, my face was so
broken out."



PAUL NOW—PIMPLES GONE
"Fleischmann's Yeast sure
cleared up my skin fine," he
says.

*A fellow feels pretty low
about having to go around
when his face is all broken
out with mean looking pimples.
I got so I started to be seen.
I felt why I'm ought to be
to tell others about this and
pimples when Fleischmann's Yeast
is. Every boy that want to get rid
of pimples ought to eat it.*
Paul Shea



Clears up Adolescent Pimples

AFTER the start of adolescence,
from about 13 to 25, important
glands develop. This disturbs the
body. The skin gets oversensitive.
Waste poisons in the blood irritate
this sensitive skin and pimples
appear.

Fleischmann's Yeast helps clear
up pimples by clearing these
skin irritants out of the
blood. Then—pimples go!

Eat 3 cakes a day—cake about
1/2 hour before each meal—
plain, or in a little water.

READ THESE 8 True Experiences of Men I Trained at Home For RADIO



NOW HAVE MY OWN RADIO BUSINESS AND AVERAGE \$55 TO \$70 A WEEK.
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333 THIRD ST.
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I DO RADIO SERVICE WORK IN SPARE TIME AND AVERAGE ABOUT \$12.92 A WEEK.
J. B. MILBY
BOX 95
LITICA, MICH.



AFTER COMPLETING TWENTY LESSONS I JOINED STATION WMPC WHERE I AM NOW CHIEF OPERATOR.
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85 MADISON ST.
LAPEER, MICH.



I AM NOW FOREMAN OVER PRODUCTION OF RADIOS FOR THE W- G- CORP.
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MY LOUDSPEAKER SYSTEM PAYS ME ABOUT \$35 A WEEK, BESIDES MY RADIO WORK.
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TOPTON, PENNA.



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LUNKEN AIRPORT
CINCINNATI, OHIO

WILL TRAIN YOU AT HOME *in Spare Time*



J. E. SMITH, President
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or part time Radio business. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, instructors, foremen, engineers, servicemen, pay up to \$6,000 a year. Radio operators get good pay and see the world besides. Automobile, aviation, commercial radio, and loud speaker firms offer good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises good jobs soon. Men trained at home are holding good jobs in all these new fields of Radio.

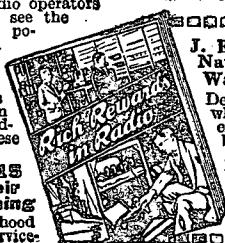
my Make \$5, \$10, \$15
Week Extra in their
are Time While Learning
practically every neighborhood
as a good spare time service.

FOR A GOOD RADIO JOB

Many Radio Experts Make \$30, \$50, \$75 a Week

Do you want to make more money? Broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay up to \$5,000 a year. Spare time Radio set servicing pays as much as \$200 to \$500 a year — full time servicing jobs pay as much as \$30, \$50, \$75 a week.

Many Radio Experts own their own full time Radio business. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, instructors, foremen, engineers, servicemen, pay up to \$6,000 a year. Radio operators get good pay and see the world besides. Automobile, aviation, commercial radio, and loud speaker firms offer good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises good jobs soon. Men trained at home are holding good jobs in all these new fields of Radio.



man. The day you enroll I start sending you Extra Money Job Sheets. They show you how to do Radio repair jobs that you can cash in on quickly. Throughout your training I send you plans and ideas that have made good spare time money for hundreds of fellows. I send you special equipment which gives you practical Radio experience — shows you how to conduct experiments and build circuits which illustrate important principles used in modern Radio sets. My Free Book tells all about this.

Find Out What Radio Offers You
Mail the coupon now for "Rich Rewards in Radio." It's free to any fellow over 16 years old. It describes Radio's spare time and full time opportunities, also those coming in Television; tells about my training in Radio and Television; shows you actual letters from men I have trained, telling what they are doing and earning; tells

about my Money Back Agreement. MAIL THE COUPON in an envelope, or paste it on a penny postcard — NOW!

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National Radio Institute, Dept. 7CS9
Washington, D. C.

MAIL
COUPON
NOW



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National Radio Institute, Dept. 7CS9,
Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send "Rich Rewards in Radio," which points out the spare time and full time opportunities in Radio and explains your 50-50 method of training men at home in spare time to become Radio Experts. (Please Write Plainly.)

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ADDRESS.....

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Two Big Novels and Two Novelettes!

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Every Other Month!

MAGAZINE

Vol. 3, No. 6

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(Book-length Novel)

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By L. P. HOLMES

Hired guns and a paid jury framed Buck Comstock for twenty-five years of prison hell. . . . But first he must pay three death-sealed debts: one to himself and his ruined ranch, one to the neighbors who called him friend—and one to the girl whose terrified scream rang in his heart!

(Novelette)

BANDIT LAWMAN

64

By LUKE SHORT

Either side of the law at Roaring Fork was a risky business that had cost many a gun-proud life. . . . Yet the man named Suffern played both sides—till he crossed a fearless frontier girl who fought with brains as well as bullets!

(Short Story)

RANGERS RIDE ALONE.....

78

By JOHN PAUL JONES

A lone Texas Ranger, sawed-off Pewee Biggers, invaded the Big Bend's inviolate robbers' roost—where any one of the renegade guns could hold off an army!

(Complete Novel)

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88

By PETER DAWSON

To his own measure, Montana Pierce fashioned a hamnoose that would bait the Singletree land-grab tyrant from his hideout. . . . He fought to win back his broken cowmen neighbors' right to live—though he himself must die!

(True Western Feature)

THE DEAD GUARD WELL THEIR GOLD!.....

105

By KENNETH P. WOOD

For an empty sack of gold dust, an ambush killer cut down the one man in all California who could locate the Lee Mine riches—buried, now, forever!

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Unseen rifles blasted from mist-draped deadfalls as Joe Jones bore his dying partner to the gun-shelter of a doom-marked canyon cabin. . . . And the one person who could side him was a blue-eyed girl—who'd drill him if he turned his back!

(Editorial)

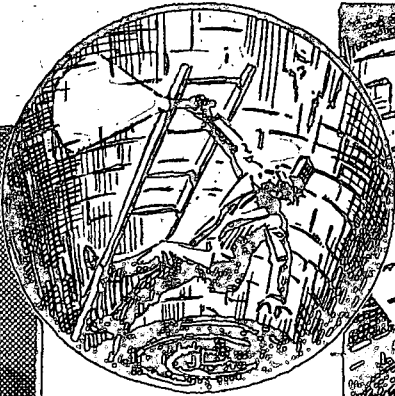
SPRING'S CALL TO NEW FRONTIERS.....

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Melting snows soon will loose the wild torrents' sweep to glorious adventure!

Published bi-monthly by Popular Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices, 205 East Forty-second Street, New York City. Harry Steeger, President and Secretary, Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter, February 28, 1938, at the Post Office at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Copyright 1937 by Popular Publications, Inc. Single copy price 15c. Yearly subscriptions in U. S. A., 75c; Canada, \$1. For advertising rates address Sam J. Perry, 205 E. 42nd St., New York, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts, kindly enclose stamped self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although all care will be exercised in handling them.

Well of the Padres His Living Tomb



San Diego Reporter, Weak from Loss of Blood, Cheats Death in Ancient Shaft

For nearly two hundred years this death-trap had waited its human prey... that was the grisly thought uppermost in my mind; as I fought for life in the ancient crumbling mission well of San Diego de Alcala," writes E. P. Lyle III.

"First, as I was climbing down to explore an opening at the water level; a loose tile struck me on the head; then the rickety ladder slipped, plunged me dazed and bleeding into the water.

"But I had clung to my flashlight and as the cold water cleared my senses; I

could see it shining under the surface. Paddling to keep afloat; I swung the light as best I could around the well. A rusted old pipe attached to the wall offered a hand hold; and was stout enough to hold me as I fought off growing dizziness from loss of blood; and climbed hand over hand to where my companions could reach me.

"They would have pulled a corpse out of that well if it hadn't been for the DATED Eveready batteries in my flashlight—batteries that were really *fresh* when I bought them months before. I would certainly have lost consciousness and drowned before my friends could have reached the mission (a quarter mile away) and returned with rope and a *light*."



**EVEREADY BATTERIES
ARE FRESH BATTERIES**

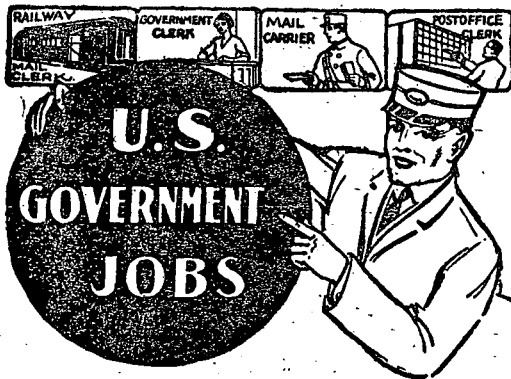
NATIONAL CARBON CO., INC.; 30 East 42nd St., New York, N. Y.

OF COURSE I WANT EVEREADYS, MR. TYSON. BUT I'M PUZZLED ABOUT THIS FRESHNESS THING. A FLASHLIGHT CELL IS A DRY BATTERY ISN'T IT?



YES, BUT A DRY BATTERY ISN'T DRY. THERE'S A WET MIX INSIDE THAT MAKES IT WORK AS THIS MOISTURE DRIES OUT, THE BATTERY GETS STALE AND ITS LIFE IS SHORTENED AND YOU CAN'T DEPEND ON IT. THAT'S WHY THE EVEREADY DATE-LINE IS SO IMPORTANT

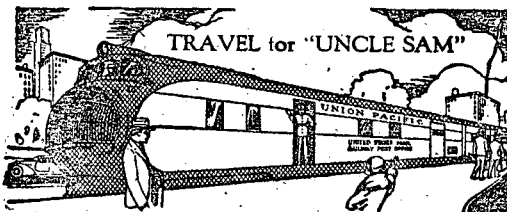




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Spring's Call to New Frontiers

SOON the snows will be melting. Trails that have been blocked through the long months of the winter will be open again. Life that has lain dormant in the frozen ground will bud once more, with promise of another harvest. And a restless spark, too long chilled by the ice-locked winter, will stir again to life in the human heart.

It will be spring. It will be the season for adventure and romance, for new enterprise, for conquest. For spring is the time of year when man's imagination reaches out to unknown, untried horizons.

In other years, spring has brought the start of epoch-marking pioneer movements. It is the season of youth, of daring. Men and women, responding to its driving, unbridled urge, have been emboldened to cross uncharted seas and trackless wildernesses.

Many of the greatest treks to the American West were made in the spring. The distant thunder you will soon hear rolling down the hills is like an echo of frontiersmen's drumming hoofs and rumbling wagon wheels. The burbling chatter of rushing, flooded streams and the whispered overtones of the warming winds have a story to tell of the courage and faith that peopled the forbidden, savage wastelands.

With the coming of the spring, gypsy blood sang in the veins of our forefathers as it sings in ours. Two generations back it inspired a pioneer hegira that will long remain one of the bravest and most glorious emigrations in history's record—the settling of the West.

The call of gold was only a minor phase. The wealth of unclaimed land, for farming or for grazing stock, seemed the major attraction to many. Others told the folks back home that they were leaving to take advantage of the opportunities for trade in

(Concluded on Page 6)



READ HOW SKINNY GAWKY MEN GAIN 10 TO 25 POUNDS THIS NEW QUICK WAY

**Thousands gaining normal hefty
pounds—in just a few weeks!**

SKINNY, friendless men who never could gain an ounce can take new hope from the experience of thousands of others with this new scientific treatment that is sweeping the country. These others have gained 10 to 25 pounds of solid, naturally attractive flesh this new, easy way—in just a few weeks!

What is more, this new discovery has given them new pep, energy and popularity for social and business success.

Why it builds up so quickly

Scientists recently discovered that great numbers of people are thin and run-down for the single reason that they do not get enough Vitamin B and iron in their daily food. Without these vital elements you may lack appetite, and not get the most body-building good out of the food you eat.

Now one of the richest known sources of this marvelous Vitamin B's cultured ale yeast. By a new process the finest imported cultured ale yeast is now concentrated 7 times—made 7 times more powerful. Then it is combined with 3 kinds of blood-building iron, pasteurized whole yeast and other valuable ingredients in pleasant little tablets known as Ironized Yeast tablets.

If you, too, need these vital elements to aid in building you up, get these new "7-power" Ironized Yeast tablets from your druggist today. Note how quickly they increase your appetite, and help you get more benefit from the body-building foods that are so essential. Then, day after day, watch flat chest develop and skinny limbs round out to natural, hefty attractiveness. See better color and natural beauty come to your cheeks. Soon you feel like an entirely new person.

Money-back guarantee

No matter how skinny and rundown you may be from lack of sufficient Vitamin B and iron, try these new Ironized Yeast tablets just a short time. See if they don't aid in building you up in just a few weeks, as they have helped thousands. If not delighted with the benefits of the very first package, money back instantly.

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BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

(Continued from Page 4)

the new, unsettled territory. Each one had some special aim—yet all shared in common the one vital, underlying reason for that hazardous journey.

It was more than the dream of riches. The prospect of creating a home, with wide lands he could till and call his own, was a great and real inducement to the pioneer. Yet that alone did not inspire the courage by which the West was won.

The impetus that whiplashed the caravans across the plains is an urge that every one of us knows. It is the pounding pulse of romance, of daring, of adventure, of spring.

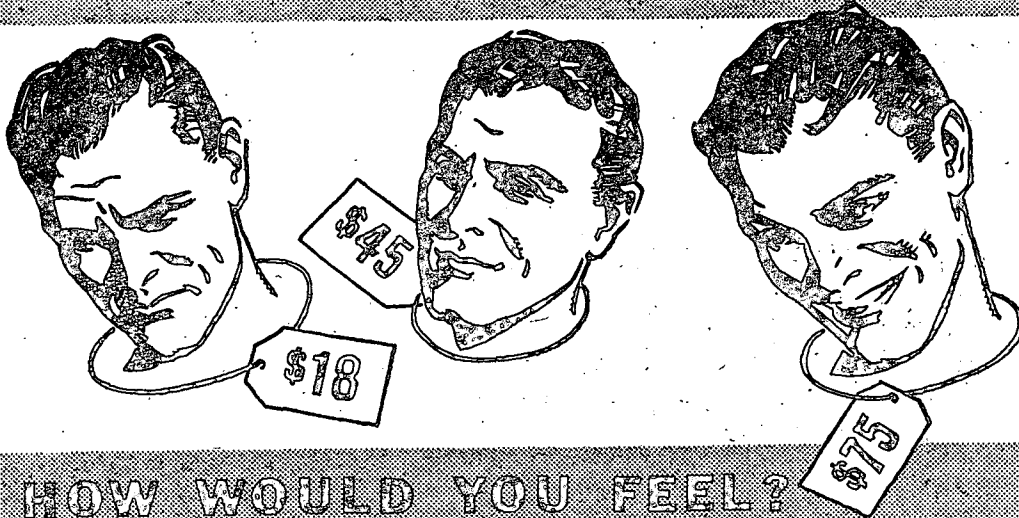
Spring; as a symbol of the spirit's wild rebellion at restraint, may last the twelve months through. It is the vibrant, dynamic power of fearless youth that you may sometimes find in the man of eighty as well as the young fellow of eighteen.

You do not need to be told to listen for the message of the thawing snow banks, of the breaking ice-jams, of the wild geese honking on their northward flight. You will hear and feel that message. It is a siren call to achievement. And how you respond, may turn the course of history—as it did sixty and more years ago, in the glorious settlement of the American West.

THE EDITOR.



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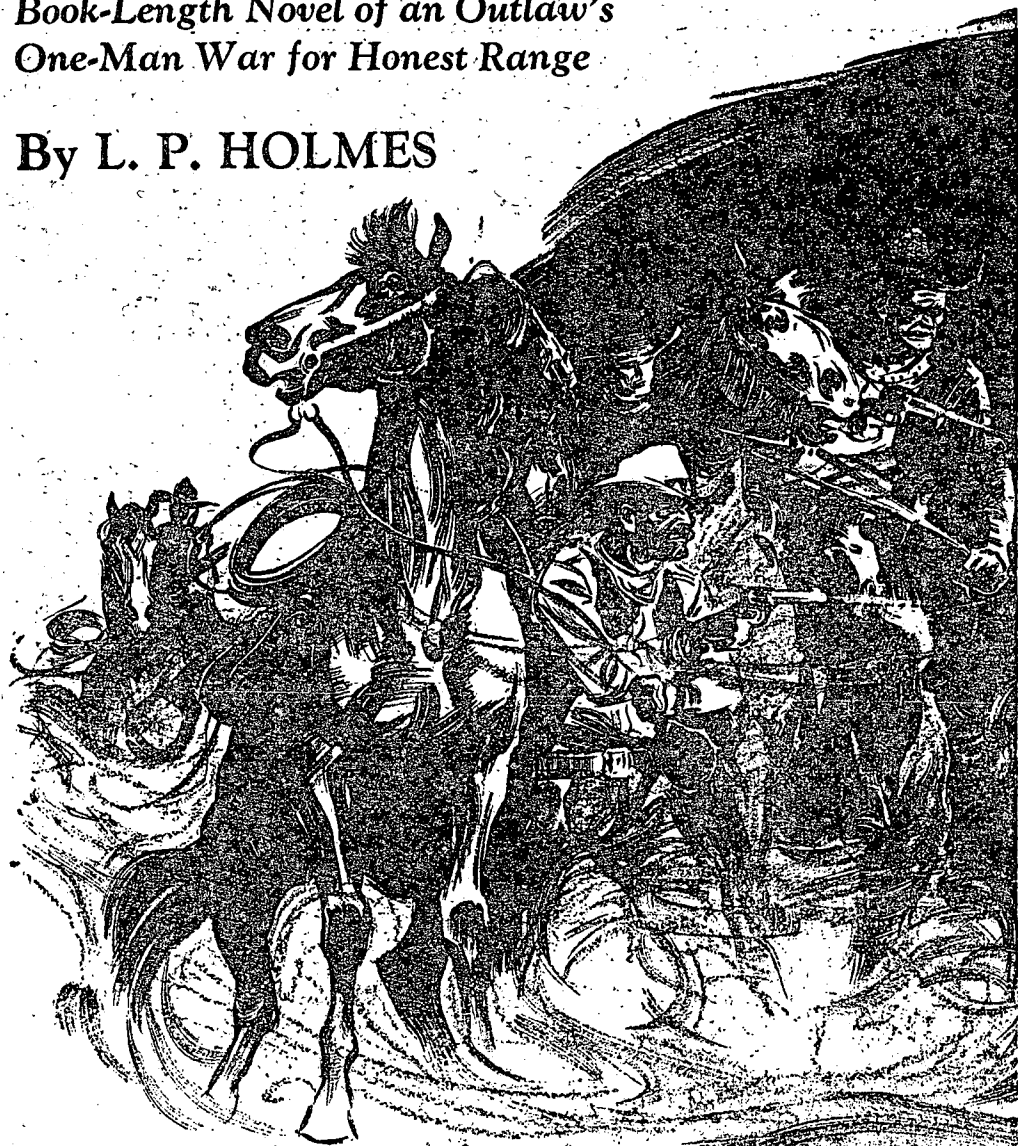
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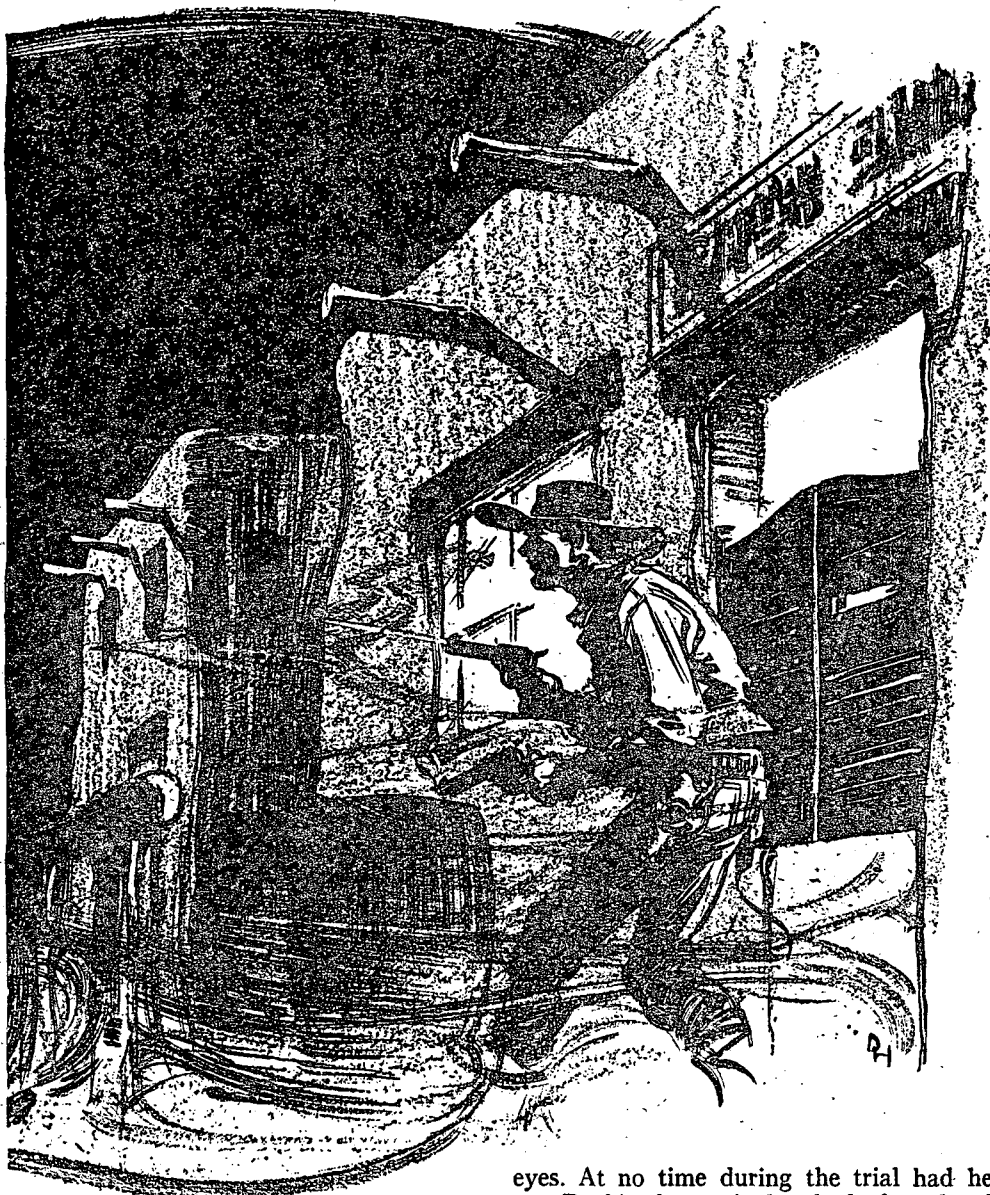
*Book-Length Novel of an Outlaw's
One-Man War for Honest Range*

By L. P. HOLMES



Hired guns and paid juries ruled the Twin Buttes range. They railroaded Buck Comstock to twenty-five years of prison hell. . . . But he had three death-sealed debts to pay before the cell door clanged shut behind him—one to himself and his ruined ranch . . . one to the beleaguered neighbors who called him friend . . . and one to the girl whose terrified scream rang in his heart!

DOOM PATROL



Chapter I

TO HELL FOR TWENTY-FIVE YEARS

JUDGE HENNING finished speaking. Buck Comstock, standing up to receive his sentence, surveyed the judge with cool, sardonic, contemptuous eyes. Judge Henning would not meet Buck's

eyes. At no time during the trial had he met Buck's glance. And as he had rendered the sentence, he had looked past Buck, over Buck's head.

For a long second after the droning voice of the judge died away, the courtroom was dead still, so still that when old Bill Morgan cleared his throat wrathfully, the sound was like a thunderclap.

Sheriff Brood Shotwell stepped up and took Buck by the right arm. Spike St. Ives,

Shotwell's number one deputy, moved up on the other side.

"That's all," growled Brood Shotwell. "Come on, Comstock."

Buck shrugged, turned and walked between them toward the side door of the courtroom, which led across some forty feet of yard before reaching the jail.

Buck twisted his head and looked out over the crowd in the courtroom. He saw Bill Morgan, Johnny Frazier and Bud Tharp pushing their way along as though to intercept Buck and his two guardians before they could reach that side door. The intention of these three was plain in their eyes and attitudes.

"No go, Bill," called Buck sharply. "It wouldn't work, anyhow. Don't start anything."

"I'll do my best, Buck," answered Bill Morgan. "But I want to state here and now that of all the cheap, crooked, low-down farces ever pulled under the name of law, this is the worst. I thought that damned, squint-eyed rooster up there was a judge."

Everybody in the room heard Bill. He spoke as he usually did, in rumbling tones which would carry a hundred yards in the teeth of a high wind. Judge Henning's pursed mouth tightened. He whanged his gavel on his desk.

"There will be no remarks against the dignity of this court," he shrilled. "I'll have you cited for contempt."

"That's the right word," bellowed Bill Morgan. "Contempt—I got plenty of that for you and all the rest of the mealy-mouthed crowd connected with this travesty . . . Just try and cite me for anything, you weasel-eyed buzzard! Try and have me arrested. I'm in a shootin' frame of mind right now, and the first hombre that touches me gets blowed in half at the belt buckle. That's cold turkey. Eat it or choke over it, whichever you please."

"Bill!" yelled Buck. "Will you shut up?"

Bill Morgan subsided with a growl. A lot of people in the courtroom were talking now. Some were angry at Bill; others were nodding their heads in approval.

A tippy puncher, standing just inside the main door of the courtroom, yipped shrilly: "That's tellin' 'em; ol' lobo! That's

tellin' 'em, yuh ol' tarantula. An' if yuh need help at smoke-rollin'; jest you call on lil' Smoky Rawlins. He'll be with yuh—till hell freezes. Yes sir—that's me—Smoky Rawlins. An' I don't like judges or sheriffs any better than you do."

This brought a laugh. The tension lessened. Buck, realizing that neither Bill nor Johnny Frazier or Bud Tharp would do anything foolish, let his eyes fix on Leek Jaeger and Frank Cutts, who stood near that side door.

Leek Jaeger, squat and burly, was rocking back and forth on his heels and toes, a habit of his when pleased. His block-jowled face, perennially unshaven, was drawn to a mocking grin, while his eyes, little and deep set and of the dull, brutal color of old lead, were squinted with triumph.

Frank Cutts once a gambler, still affected the immaculate dress of his former calling. His thin, pale face was a graven mask, but in his black eyes also glinted triumph.

Buck Comstock's eyes went over the two men swiftly and came to a startled halt on the girl who stood between them. It was the first time in his life Buck had ever seen her. Yet, for some reason, sight of her gave him a distinct shock.

She was a pretty girl, not over twenty, a girl with wide, grave, dusky eyes, crisp black hair and a softly crimson mouth. The color of her skin was that of remarkably pure, richly-tinted old ivory. She was slim and trig and dainty in a close fitting traveling suit of dark brown material. Just before Buck and his two guards came opposite the little group, Leek Jaeger leaned over and murmured something in the girl's ear. The girl's eyes sought Buck's face and she seemed to shrink slightly.

Buck looked at her coolly, met her glance squarely. Then Brood Shotwell kicked the side door open, and Buck was outside, under the shade of a clump of cottonwoods.

Buck would have liked to linger under those cottonwoods. Where he was going, there wouldn't be any trees. On a nodding branch tip, gay in black and gold, an oriole piped its rich notes . . .

"Hurry up!" rasped Brood Shotwell: "I want to get you safe behind bars again,

Comstock. Some of those salty pals of yours might get wild notions if we stand out here in the open too long."

Two more steps and the jail door clanged behind Buck

ALMOST immediately the door opened again. Brood Shotwell and Curt Wallace, a slender young lawyer in store clothes, came in. Curt Wallace stood looking miserably at Buck. His sensitive face was now wreathed in gloom.

"Buck," he said, "this is hell. I don't know what to say. It's all my fault. I made a mess of things. As a lawyer, I'd make a good sheep-herder."

"Not your fault, Curt," said Buck quietly. "You did everything any man could do. But things were stacked against me. Forget it."

Curt shook his head. "I'll never be able to forget it—not as long as I live. Twenty-five years in Pinole! My God, Buck, do you realize what that means?"

Buck's smile was bitter. "Afraid I do, Curt. That sentence was equivalent to a rope around my neck—only I'll be a damn sight longer dying. And did you see how old Henning enjoyed it? He shore rolled those words over his tongue."

"I'm not supposed to listen to you jaspers run down. Judge Henning, you know," growled Brood Shotwell.

Buck laughed softly, but there was a harsh sound in that laugh, like the breaking of ice. "If you stick around me, you'll have to, Brood," he said. "He's a shyster, with a rotten mark on his soul. And he's not alone."

Brood Shotwell's heavy brows drew down. "Meaning what, by that crack?"

"Forget it," said Buck wearily. He crossed to the narrow bunk against the far wall and sat down, fumbling absently for the makings in his shirt pocket.

"I'm going to keep on fighting, of course," said Curt Wallace. "I'll go clear to the governor."

Buck shrugged. "Wouldn't do no good, Curt. Besides, my money is gone. I'm broke."

"Damn the money!" cried Wallace. "This is for principle."

Sheriff Brood Shotwell looked at his

watch. "I ain't got time to stand here while you jaspers talk in circles. If you got anything real important to say—say it, and then we'll get out of here. I got to make arrangements to start Comstock traveling towards Pinole first thing tomorrow morning."

Young Curt Wallace steadied to a grave dignity. "Somewhere in this mess are some filthy fingers and some lying tongues—also, some crooked motives. I'm sticking with the proposition until I uncover some of those things. When I do this country is going to see a shakedown they'll date time from."

He shook hands with Buck. "Keep your chin up, Buck. Twenty-five years is a long time for a bunch of snakes to keep entirely out of sight. And I'll be waiting with a club for the first head that shows."

They went out. The door closed, and Buck was once more alone. Suddenly he realized just how much alone. Beyond these four walls he had friends, but there was nothing they could do. This thing was about settled. Twenty-five years! A little of Buck's iron self-control slipped away from him. He shivered. Twenty-five years—in Pinole Penitentiary!

If he lived that long he would be over fifty when he got out. He'd be an old man, with the best of life gone by—all his hard work, his ambitions, his purpose in life shot to hell, thrown away, wasted!

Buck Comstock knew how a trapped animal felt. And now that it was all over, somehow the whole scene lay fairly clear before him. Looking back, he could see how cunningly the net had been woven and drawn about him. And he knew that as long as he lived he would never forget the look of satisfaction on the faces of Leek Jaeger and Frank Cutts as he passed them on his way out of the courtroom.

The afternoon waned and died. Dusk came in and the shadows in the jail thickened to blackness. Through the single narrow, barred window, Buck could see the stars winking out. Buck had always liked to watch the stars. Many a night he had lain in his soogan, looking up at them, watching their slow wheel. There wouldn't be any stars in Pinole. Even their ageless brilliance could not penetrate stone walls—prison walls.

DEPUTY SPIKE ST. IVES came in with Buck's supper. He carried the tray in one hand, a ready gun in the other. St. Ives had little imagination, but he was a cautious, suspicious sort. From the crook of his left elbow hung a lantern.

Buck, forestalling the cadaverous deputy's warning command, moved over to a far corner, while St. Ives deposited lantern and tray of food on the bunk. Then St. Ives retreated to the door while Buck crossed to the bunk and ate.

"Looks like this is the last night you'll have to bother with me, Spike," drawled Buck mockingly.

St. Ives grunted. "Ddamned glad of it! I never did like to wet-nurse a killer."

Buck's eyes narrowed. But he said nothing more. You got nowhere arguing with a fellow like Spike St. Ives. Only, thought Buck sardonically, it was strange to be called a killer by a man who packed at least six notches on his gun.

Just as Buck finished eating, two more men came in. They were Brood Shotwell and Leek Jaeger.

"All right, Spike," said Shotwell. "You can mosey along. Ram along out to Long Barn and see if you can locate that Mex vaquero—the one they call Concho. Slim Bradley swears that Concho knows where that Oregon bronc of his went to. Bring the Mex in if you can find him. I want to question him."

St. Ives nodded and went out. Buck Comstock, sitting on the edge of the bunk, was strung tight and cold. He had never imagined that he could hate any man as he hated Leek Jaeger. Even in that tumultuous moment when he had faced Ben Sloan through smoke, he had not known hate. He had gone for his gun and turned lead loose on Sloan merely because of the instinctive prompting of the oldest unwritten law in the world—self-preservation. But he had hardly known hate, even at that time.

With Leek Jaeger, it was different. From the moment he had first laid eyes on Jaeger, some two years before, he had hated the man. It was something instinctive, something which had leaped into life, full blown and savage, with the first meet-

ing of their eyes. And that hate had grown with the years.

Buck spoke to Brood Shotwell. "If you've brought this coyote in here so he can gloat, Brood, you're less of a man than I thought."

"He's got something to tell you," growled Shotwell, "some kind of a proposition to make."

"I want no dealing with him," rasped Buck. "I wouldn't trust him an inch in broad daylight."

"Wait a minute, Comstock," said Jaeger. "I know you hate my guts. That's your privilege. But remember—twenty-five years is a long time. You'd be a bigger fool than I think if you weren't willing to make a trade that'll cut that time to maybe five years. Think that over."

Buck sat very still, his thoughts racing. What was Jaeger up to? What sort of a scheme was going on in that bullet-head? What sort of a trade could Jaeger possibly manipulate which would reduce the sentence from twenty-five to five years? Buck's first impulse was to tell Jaeger to go to hell. He choked it back, however, for another idea came to him, an idea which sent the quick, white flame of hope burning through him. He fenced cautiously.

"You're just making talk, Jaeger. You may figure you're the he-wolf in this neck of the woods but you don't rate big enough to cut any part of that sentence."

"I wouldn't be here tonight if I wasn't sure of my ground," said Jaeger curtly. "If you want to listen to my proposition, say so. Otherwise, I'll be on my way."

BUCK got up, began pacing back and forth across the inner end of the jail room. His eyes, narrowed and hidden in the shadows which lay above the ragged circle of the lantern's light were burning with a strange and reckless glint. He was thinking of just two things right now. One was that Brood Shotwell had not locked the jail door. The other was that if Leek Jaeger proved he could reverse that twenty-five year sentence, it would be as much as an admission that the whole trial had been framed and that Jaeger was more than a little afraid of events which might pop up in the future.

Buck Comstock came to a savage, relentless decision. "All right," he snapped. "Let's hear your proposition, Jaeger."

"I won't mince words," said Jaeger. "I can use that Cotton Valley range of yours, Comstock. With you heading for Pinole tomorrow, I could go ahead and grab it, regardless. That would raise a stink, of course, but I reckon I could live it down. I don't like trouble any more than the next man, so I'm willing to make a bargain with you. Sign that Cotton Valley range over to me and I'll see that twenty years is taken off that sentence. There it is—straight up and down. Take it or leave it."

"And after I signed over that Cotton Valley range what's to prevent you from letting me be dragged off to Pinole and forgetting all about me?"

Jaeger shrugged. "You'll just have to take my word for that."

Brood Shotwell spoke: "Maybe you don't realize it, Leek, but the talk you've made just now throws a nasty smell over my office, over Judge Henning, over the whole organization of law and order on the Twin Buttes range. Me, I don't like it."

"You'll have to lump it then, Shotwell," said Jaeger bluntly. "Let me see . . . Three months from now you come up for election, don't you? Kind of like your job, don't you. Well, go out and see who controls the votes in the Twin Butte country.

You'll find that I do. Now then, Comstock—what's your answer?"

"This!" said Buck.

Ten feet he covered in one terrific, diving plunge—a long, lean, hurtling projectile. Whipping out ahead of him was a leaden fist backed by muscles of rawhide power. His fist caught Leek Jaeger squarely in the face, pulping his nose, smashing his lips.

Jaeger, in falling, crashed into Brood Shotwell, and the two men went down in a tangle. Buck already on his way to the door, kicked out at the lantern, which smashed on the bunk. There was a gust of smoke, then a spreading ball of spattering flame, some of which dropped on Brood Shotwell's pant legs.

Shotwell, fumbling wildly for his gun, felt the bite of that flame and started slapping madly at it. This instant of delay was all that Buck Comstock needed. In another second he was out of the jail and running.

He whipped about the corner of the old adobe courthouse, reached the street. Several saddle mounts were tied to a handy hitchrail. Buck did not hesitate. He swung into the nearest saddle and lifted the bronco to a wild run.

By the time Brood Shotwell could put out his burning pants and drag the dazed and bleeding Leek Jaeger away from the spreading flames inside the jail, Buck Comstock was clear of the town of Twin Buttes and racing into the far, free night.

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Chapter II

A FUGITIVE FINDS A FRIEND

THE TWIN BUTTES range was made up of three distinct and separate valleys, roughly parallel and running from north to south. North of them stretched an area of broken, tangled malpais country, from the center of which rose two jagged buttes, scarified by wind and weather. These two buttes, known locally as East Butte and West Butte, were the basis of the name of the town of Twin Buttes, which lay at the head of the westernmost valley.

Buck Comstock, speeding out of the southern end of Twin Buttes' single street, turned east and set the horse to a long, ground-eating run. Buck had spent a lifetime in the saddle and he knew horses. This one he had grabbed was a good one, fresh and full of fire. Buck felt vaguely that he knew this horse, that he recognized its gait, that he had ridden it before. He fingered the horn, passed a hand over the bucking rolls. There, on the face of the rolls was smooth, cold metal, set into the leather, metal shaped like a star. And then Buck knew. This was Bill Morgan's big, bald-faced sorrel.

Buck smiled tightly. No matter what else might be laid to his door, good old Bill would never accuse him of horse stealing. The fact that Buck had, by chance, grabbed this bronc for a getaway, would tickle Bill to death. Also, Buck knew this was a horse to rely on; he had little fear that he would be overtaken even if Brood Shotwell should manage to follow his trail. For Bill Morgan's bald-faced sorrel was known the length and breadth of the Twin Butte's range for its speed and bottom and staying power.

On Buck's left, jagged and lonely against the starlit sky, loomed the bulk of East and West Buttes. Buck reined gradually toward them, with the idea of skirting the malpais country. This would take him well above the J Bar C headquarters, which lay midway across Timber Valley, the first of the three valleys.

Under the drumming hoofs of the sorrel, the miles rolled swiftly back. Soon the horse began breasting a long, rolling slope,

where scattered, stunted sage began to take the place of the grassland of the valley. The slope topped a sort of tableland, barren and rocky, and when some two miles of this had been covered, Buck's trail dropped off into the wide and flat center valley, the richest of the three. This was Coyote Valley, and here lay Bill Morgan's spread, the Circle Star, Bud Tharp's Rafter T, Johnny Frazier's Lazy F and, far at the southern end, Old Man Addis' outfit, the Stirrup Cross.

Beyond the fertile reaches of Coyote Valley and across another sage tableland lay Cotton Valley in the center of which Buck's own little spread, the Half Moon, was situated. South of Buck's spread, Cotton Valley ran out into free, government land, which lacked water, so that it was only of tangible grazing value in the late winter and spring.

The northern portion of Cotton Valley was held by the Wineglass outfit, which had been Ben Sloan's spread. But now that Ben Sloan was dead, it was problematical as to who would eventually own the Wineglass.

Again, before Buck Comstock's eyes, a picture took form, carved indelibly on the retina of his mind, a picture he had seen many many times during the past month. It was of Ben Sloan, hatchet face set in a killing snarl, eyes red with blood hunger, crouched in deadly belligerency as he dragged at his guns. Then the tragic finale of that picture—Buck's gun leaping into his hand, coughing heavily in report, jarring and rearing in recoil. And Ben Sloan had lunged forward on his face, the startling wonder of death in his staring eyes.

For that they had called Buck a killer! For that they had dragged him to jail, tried him, and sentenced him to twenty-five years in Pinole Penitentiary. But now he was free once more, at least for a time—a fugitive from law, but free!

THE sorrel halted, heaved a gusty sigh and stood tossing its head. Aroused abruptly from his thoughts, Buck saw before him a corral and the heavy bulk of feed sheds and ranch buildings. It startled him for a moment. Then he laughed softly, relaxed and patted the sorrel's neck. The horse had come home. This was the Circle Star, Bill Morgan's spread.

The place was silent. It seemed almost deserted until Buck caught the pale gleam of light in a single window of the ranch-house. Buck twisted in the saddle, looking back the way he had come, eyes and ears straining. There was no sound of pursuit, no sight of any moving thing. Buck dismounted and prowled up to the ranch-house, peering guardedly through the window.

A grim smile flickered over Buck's face. In that room, sprawled at ease on his bunk, lay fat, rotund Bones Baker, the Circle Star cook. Bones held a magazine of lurid romance in both tense fists and, by the light of the lamp on the chair beside his bunk, was reading avidly.

Buck rapped softly on the window. Bones jerked upright, stared around. Buck tapped the window again. Bones unearthed a .45 Colt from under his blankets, pushed open the window and leaned out.

"Who's there?" he demanded belligerently. "If any of you gol-darn grub-spoilers are aimin' to play a trick on me, I'll hash yuh up with a couple of slugs."

"It's Buck Comstock, Bones," drawled Buck. "Can I come in?"

Bones' jaw dropped, his eyes bugged out. "Huh—who? Buck Comstock! How the hell? Sa-ay, you're supposed to be in the jug."

"I know. But I made a break for it, won free and jumped that big sorrel of Bill's. The bronc brought me straight here. I got to make a hide-away somewhere, Bones. I'll need grub and some blankets—and a couple of guns. How's chances?"

Bones flung the window wide. "Gosh Almighty, boy, you shore can!" he exclaimed. "Climb in here. Gollies, I'm glad to see you. I heard they give you twenty-five years for killin' that pigeon-toed ol' tarantula bug Ben Sloan. I figured I'd seen the last of you in these parts, Buck. And I was feelin' plenty bad about it—plenty. You bet you can have that grub and blankets. You can have anything I got."

Bones wrung Buck's hand tightly. "You had any supper?" he demanded eagerly.

"Yeah. I'd fed before I had my chance for a break. Don't waste no time throwing that pack of blankets and grub together, Bones. Shotwell is pounding along my trail, back there somewhere. He'll end up

here eventually, and I want to be a long time gone by then."

Bones caught up the lamp and waddled out. In five minutes he had a flour sack of grub and a couple of blankets ready. He made another short journey, and came back with a pair of gun belts, heavy with hardware. Under one arm he had a rifle.

"Here y'are," he puffed. "These are Bill's spare belt guns and one of the half dozen or so rifles laying around the house. I'll rustle you some cartridges."

Ten minutes after he had arrived Buck was ready to leave. In addition to the grub, blankets, guns and ammunition, Bones had given him an old sombrero and a short, warm jacket. As a final thought, Bones threw in a slicker. Then he helped Buck lug it all down to the corrals.

"Better keep right on travelin' on that sorrel, Buck," advised Bones. "Bill won't mind a bit. He kinda thinks a lot of you, cowboy."

"They don't come any better than Bill," said Buck. "But I don't want that sorrel. Known too well in these parts. See can you find me a old saddle while I catch up some ordinary looking nag."

Bones got the saddle, and Buck cinched it on a well built grullo, an Indian horse carrying a brand no white man could decipher. Buck tied grub blankets and slicker behind the cante, slung the rifle in the boot under the stirrup leather, then turned to Bones.

"Listen close," he said. "I don't want you to forget a word of this, Bones. I want to see Bill. I want to have a long talk with him. But I can't afford the chance of sticking around here. He'll have to come to me. Tell him I'll meet him tomorrow night around midnight at Indian Spring. Don't forget."

"I won't" Bones promised. "How you fixed for money? I got about twenty bucks here you can have."

Buck jabbed the fat cook affectionately in the stomach. "Thanks. I don't need money. I need friends. I got one in you. So long, Bones."

BONES BAKER listened until the sound of the grullo's hoofs had died away. Then he started automatically to unsaddle the sorrel, but stopped almost immediately.

"Nope," he muttered. "That won't do. Brood Shotwell is liable to come rammin' in here hellity-larrup any minute, and I don't want him to think Buck has been here. I'll just leave this nag stand here as is."

As an afterthought he looped the reins about the saddlehorn. Then he went back to the ranchhouse and squatted in the doorway to listen and wait.

A half hour later, coming down on the ranch from the west, there sounded the rising clatter of speeding hoofs. Bones nodded wisely, returned to his room and sprawled out on his bunk once more.

He heard those racing hoofs speed to a halt outside the door, then a clamor of voices, among which he recognized Bill Morgan's heavy rumble and Brood Shotwell's cold, clipped tones. Then Bill Morgan yelled, "Hey, Bones! Wake up and come out here."

Bones went to the door, magazine in one hand, lamp in the other. He stood in the open doorway, yawning hugely. "Hi, Bill! What you want? What's all the excitement?"

Brood Shotwell stalked up out of the darkness with Bill Morgan behind him. "You been awake all evening?" demanded Shotwell harshly.

"Yep," nodded Bones. "Been thinkin' of turnin' the light out and gettin' some shut-eye, but this story was so gol-darn excitin' . . ."

"Seen or heard anybody ride up?" cut in the sheriff impatiently.

Bones shook his head. "Not until you jaspers came in. Why? You lookin' for somebody?"

"Oh, no," Shotwell growled caustically. "I'm jest rammin' around through the dark making love to the squinch-owls. Come alive, you tub of lard. You damned shore you didn't hear or see anybody ride in here besides us?"

"I said so, didn't I?" retorted Bones. "Gol blast it, just because you're sheriff, Brood Shotwell, is no sign you can go around callin' folks names, regardless. Maybe I am kinda plump, but I can kick your teeth out if I get mad enough."

"There's a hoss down at the corrals—Bill Morgan's big sorrel," said Shotwell coldly. "That bronc was stole off the street

of Twin Buttes by Buck Comstock. Now it's out here. You mighty shore Comstock didn't ride that bronc in here?"

Bones stared at the sheriff in amazement. "You must be loco. I hear this afternoon that Buck Comstock had been sentenced to twenty-five years in Pinole and that you had him locked up tight in your jail in town. Now you try and tell me he rode Bill's sorrel out to this ranch. What kind of a joke is this?"

"Joke be damned!" spat Shotwell. "Comstock made a getaway tonight and rode that sorrel out of town. The bronc is here. Comstock must have rode it in."

Bones seemed to be trying to get all this news straight in his round, close-clipped head. He opened his mouth and closed it two or three times. He gulped, then shrugged.

"This shore is news to me," he asserted stoutly. "If Buck Comstock rode that sorrel into this ranch, he shore musta come in awful quiet. I never heard nothin'. I never saw nothin'. I didn't even know the bronc was here. I tell yuh, I ain't seen hide or hair of a soul since Dave Wagg rode by just before suppertime an' told me Buck had been cinched for twenty-five years. That's all I can tell you. Don't chaw on it if it hurts your teeth."

Brood Shotwell cursed savagely, furiously, stamping back and forth.

A cowboy came hurrying up from the dark. "Say, Brood," he called, "did you notice how the reins on that sorrel bronc are tied? That hoss ain't been draggin' those reins. They're looped over the horn."

"What of it?" snapped Shotwell. "That don't mean anything."

"I wonder," shrugged the cowboy. "It could mean that somewhere between here and town, Comstock got off that bronc, turned it loose, and dodged out on foot. He might have cut north into that malpais country around the buttes."

The idea caught with Shotwell momentarily. Then he shook his head slowly. "Not likely. Comstock was raised in the saddle. He wouldn't give up a perfectly good bronc to do his travelin' on foot—least of all, when he'd know I'd be after him."

Bill Morgan spoke, in his deep, rolling tones. "In this case he might. It would

be just like Buck, knowing that sorrel was my pet bronc, to use it only as long as he absolutely had to and then turn it loose to come home. Still, the darned chump ought to know I'd give him that bronc or all the brons I own, if they'd help him get away."

Shotwell whirled on Bill Morgan, scowling. "That kind of talk—"

"Listen, Brood!" cut in Morgan. "You know damn well how I stand in this mess. I'm for Buck Comstock, all the way. And I don't give a tinker's dam who knows it. I hope he gets away, clean. I hope you founder yourself before you catch him. And if I thought that by blowing your head off, right here and now, it would make Buck sure to get away, I'd be more than likely to chance it. I guess that's plain enough."

Shotwell cursed and whirled toward his horse. "We're going back and take a look at that malpais country," he yelled to his posse. "Come on!"

IN a surge and creak of saddle gear, they were gone, pounding back the way they had come. But Bill Morgan remained with Bones, who was looking out into the night with a twinkle of satisfaction in his eyes. Morgan, however, was moody and scowling.

"Why the devil did that darned chump of a Buck turn that bronc loose to come home?" he growled. "He could have kept the sorrel and welcome. Me, I got a good idea to throw a saddle on a spare bronc, take the sorrel and cut around into that malpais ahead of Shotwell and his posse. If Buck's up there afoot, he won't have a Chinaman's chance."

"Don't you worry none about Buck," murmured Bones softly. "Buck's been took care of already."

Morgan fixed alert, eager eyes on his cook. "Then . . ."

"Yup," Bones nodded. "Buck was here. He rode the sorrel in. I gave him some grub and blankets and guns. He took that grullo Injun pony. He's to hell and gone over in Cotton Valley by this time."

"Come inside while I kiss you, you fat, old fox!" boomed Morgan. "Come inside and tell me all about it."

In the seclusion of the cook's room,

Bones told his story, while Morgan listened eagerly.

"So Buck high-tailed it out on the grullo," Bones ended. "And the last thing he told me was this: You're to meet him at Indian Spring around midnight tomorrow. He said he wanted to have a big pow-wow with you. And he said for us to clam up and say nothin' to anybody else. There you have it boss."

"Indian Spring," muttered Bill Morgan. "I'll be there. You bet. Bones, I think I'll give you a raise in wages."

"You will like hell!" retorted Bones. "I didn't help Buck out for pay. I did it because I like him, because he's my good friend. Why, when Dave Wagg told me that orrey-eyed old pelican of a Judge Henning had give Buck twenty-five years in Pinole, I was all busted up. I couldn't swallow my evenin' grub. And when I laid down and tried to read to get my thoughts straightened out, I couldn't even see the print. Honest Bill, I was fair blubberin'; thinkin' of a high-class boy like Buck Comstock, due to put in twenty-five years in Pinole. Was I glad when he showed up, free and ready to ride? Mama!"

"That whole trial was a farce, Bones," said Morgan. "They railroaded Buck cold. The jury was hand-picked; ten out of the twelve were J Bar C men. The other two were Toad Black and Duke Younger. Buck didn't have a chance. Leek Jaeger and Frank Cutts pulled the strings all the way. I'm no fool. I could see that."

"Well" said Bones slowly, "I don't know nothin' about that. But I do know this. Buck Comstock would never have pulled a gun an' cut Ben Sloan down if Sloan hadn't gone for his war-stick first. Buck ain't the kind to kill unless he has to—in self-defense. So it must have been self-defense when he rocked off Ben Sloan."

Chapter III

PROWLERS AT THE WINEGLASS

ABOUT mid-afternoon of the following day Bill Morgan cinched his silver-mounted hull on the big sorrel, slung a canteen to the horn, stuffed a couple of sandwiches into his slicker roll and rode leisurely south through the center of Coyote Valley.

He stopped for a time at both the Rafter T and the Lazy F, where he held short confabs with the respective owners, Bud Tharp and Johnny Frazier. What he told these two left them with musing smiles on their faces.

Traveling on south, Morgan pulled in at the Stirrup Cross just at sundown. There he ran into a distinct surprise. Old Man Addis stood in front of the ranchhouse, engaged in heavy argument with none other than Leek Jaeger and Frank Cutts.

Bill Morgan's eyes narrowed slightly, then became bland and innocent, as he drew up before them. He leaned over and rested his forearms across his saddlehorn in a lazy slouch. He nodded. "Howdy, gents."

Old Man Addis looked flustered. He was a narrow-faced old fox, with thinning, sandy hair, a ragged, tired looking mustache, and pale eyes under bleached brows. Frank Cutts showed no change of expression on his coldly set features, but Leek Jaeger scowled openly at Morgan's arrival.

"Kind of a long way off your range, ain't you, Morgan?" growled Jaeger.

Morgan shrugged. "Not near as far off as you are, Jaeger. What happened to your phiz? You look like a mule kicked you."

Jaeger, his blocky face swollen and bruise-blackened from the terrific blow Buck Comstock had given him the night before, cursed savagely.

"Shotwell was telling me that you made some pretty long talk last night," he grated.

Bill Morgan lifted his eyebrows. "Suppose you talk a little plainer. I don't know what you're driving at."

"He told me you said you hoped Comstock got away, and added that you'd do anything you could to help him."

Morgan shrugged again, carelessly. "Yeah, I said that. I meant it, too. Buck Comstock is a good friend of mine. I think a lot of him, and I don't give a whoop who knows it."

"He's a fugitive from law—a killer, a murderer," spat Jaeger.

"Part of that is true, and part's a damn lie," rasped Bill Morgan coldly. "He's a fugitive from law—damn cheap law, I might add—but he's no killer and no mur-

derer. Any man who says he is, is a liar."

"I say he is," bawled Jaeger.

"Then the shoe fits you—perfect," drawled Morgan, coldly watchful.

Jaeger's swollen face twisted into a snarl, his right hand began to creep toward the gun at his hip. Old Man Addis, his pale eyes flickering with sudden fear, started to back away.

Frank Cutts caught Jaeger by the arm, swung him partially around. "Don't be a damned fool, Leek," he rapped out. "In the first place, you're acting like a kid. And, in the second, you wouldn't have a ghost of a chance. Trading words like this don't mean a thing. Come on! You and I are all through here. We're riding."

Bill Morgan a cool, musing smile on his face, watched the two partners climb into their saddles and spur away. Then Morgan looked at Old Man Addis. "What did those two jaspers have on their minds, Tom?" he drawled.

"Business—just a little business," Addis answered testily. "Damn it all, Morgan, you don't realize how heavy-worded you can be sometimes. You had no call to give the lie to Leek."

"I said," returned Morgan coolly, "that any man who says Buck Comstock is a killer and a murderer, is a liar. I'm sticking to those words."

"Comstock put Ben Sloan in his grave, didn't he?" twanged Addis angrily. "If that don't make him a killer, I don't know what does."

"A killer," said Morgan, "is a professional—a man who sells his guns, who works to get the edge before rolling smoke, who goes out with deliberate intent to cut a man down. Throwing a gun in self-defense makes no man a killer."

"But the jury decided it wasn't a case of self-defense," argued Addis. "They decided that Comstock went out deliberately to get Ben Sloan—and got him."

"That jury didn't go up there to give Buck Comstock a square deal. They were hand-picked for just one purpose—to find Buck guilty. They never paid a damn bit of attention to the evidence."

Old Man Addis threw up his hands. "I ain't got time to stand here arguin' all that over again. You got your opinion; I got mine. What brought you down this far, anyhow?"

"I started out with the idea of business," said Morgan crisply. "But I've sorta changed my mind. I don't like the company I found you in, Tom. *Adios.*"

With that, Morgan swung the sorrel about and started back the way he had come. Old Man Addis stared after him, with his narrow face twisted angrily.

DUSK found Bill Morgan halfway between the Stirrup Cross and Lazy F. Morgan had been watching his backtrail carefully. When he was sure it was empty, he seized upon the first deep blanket of shadows to turn the sorrel directly east.

The first stars found him crossing Cotton Valley. Leaving that, he pushed up past the long rimrock and out onto the vast reaches of Big Sage Desert. Here he turned slightly northeast and set the sorrel to a steady jog.

Lacking perhaps some fifteen minutes of midnight, Bill Morgan rode up to a dark bulk of jagged rock outcroppings, sparsely blanketed with sage and mesquite. The night was illimitable, vast, silent. For a moment Morgan knew a qualm of worry. Perhaps, somewhere along the line, Buck Comstock might have run into trouble.

Then a cool voice spoke from the darkness: "Evenin', Bill."

"Buck!" Morgan stepped from the saddle as Buck Comstock, a lean, tall shadow, moved up to him. They shook hands wordlessly. Then Morgan spoke gruffly: "You beat Johnny and Bud and me to it, you long-legged whelp. We were aiming to bust that gol-darned jail wide open and haul you out by the scruff of your neck. But you beat us to it. I saw Jaeger today. His face still looks like it had been side-swiped

by a freight train. How you been making it, kid?"

"Fair enough. I forgot to have old Bones put some extra tobacco into that grub pack, though. I'm going to rob you of all you got."

"Your luck still holds," chuckled Morgan. "I always pack half a dozen extra sacks in my saddle-bags. Here, I'll get it for you."

They built smokes, squatted on their heels. "Bones said you wanted to tell me something," Morgan reminded Buck.

"Here it is," Buck said. "Maybe you been wondering how Jaeger happened to be present in the jail when I made my get-away?"

Morgan nodded. "That's right, I have."

"Well, here's something that will startle your ears. Jaeger came in there to lay a proposition in front of me. He said that if I'd sign over my Cotton Valley range to him, he'd see that my sentence was cut from twenty-five to five years. What do you make of that?"

Morgan sat very still. "It just proves that you were railroaded, that there is a weak spot somewhere in the scheme that was cooked up to frame you. And it sounds like Jaeger is afraid it might pop out and raise hell."

Buck nodded. "It proves that and suggests a lot else. Some folks say Jaeger and Cutts bought the J Bar C, fair and upright. Others claim it was euchered from Bob Hafey over the poker table Cutts used to run in the Yellow Horse Saloon. Anyway, they got it. In no time at all, they got control of all of Timber Valley. I don't pretend to know how they got it, but they did."

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"I heard that cattle buyer, Ed Fitch, tell Leek Jaeger that if the J Bar C didn't quit stocking Timber Valley so heavy they'd strip the range. Jaeger laughed and said there was a lot of other range around Twin Buttes that he and Cutts intended to control before they were done. What other range is there, except Coyote and Cotton Valleys?"

"None," grunted Morgan. "Go on. You interest me, boy—you interest me."

"Okay. Time was when Ben Sloan and I got along well enough. Then Sloan started turning pretty mean and sulky. I didn't bother him, figuring he'd outgrow it. But he didn't. He grew worse. Finally, one day in town, he accused me of sleeping some of his stuff. I laughed at him and told him he was crazy. He got so he wouldn't even talk to me. Then came that day—well, you know what happened. He accused me again of tampering with his stock, and I got mad. I told him he was a damned liar. He went for his gun. It was him or me. I got him."

"Now I'm dodging the law and Ben Sloan is dead—and there's nothing to keep the J Bar C from moving into Cotton Valley. If Jaeger could have bluffed me into signing over my Cotton Valley holdings, it would have been a big help—made it easier for the J Bar C to move in. Let's suppose the J Bar C moves into Cotton Valley. Where does that leave the middle and richest valley of the three, the Coyote range?"

"Right in the center of J Bar C holdings, and shore as hell to be swallowed up sooner or later," Morgain said tersely. "Buck, you've made a picture. You've make a picture."

BUCK inhaled deeply, his lips grim. "They're clever," mused Morgan. "Clever as hell! Ben Sloan always did have a ugly temper. By setting him against you, it was almost a cinch that he'd force gunplay. And it wouldn't matter a tinker's dam one way or the other which of you two got killed. They'd railroad the other fellow for murder, leaving Cotton Valley wide open. Oh, I get it now. I get it!"

"Thought you would, Bill," nodded Buck. "It's just like reading signs on a trail—easy to figure out if you look at the right marks."

"And the answer to it, Buck, is what?"

"The answer is," said Buck, with fierce grimness, "that the J Bar C doesn't get a foothold in Cotton Valley. Once they dig in there, Bill, you and Johnny and Bud can begin counting the days until your finish. It isn't Cotton Valley they really want. It's Coyote Valley."

"Correct," said Morgan. "Go on."

"My range is still my range, even though I am what is known as a fugitive from justice. But the Wineglass, Ben Sloan's old spread—well, if Jaeger and Cutts can get hold of that they got their foothold. Your play, Bill, is to beat 'em to the Wineglass. What you should do is line it for town first thing tomorrow, get hold of Curt Wallace and tell him to try to locate the nearest kin of Ben Sloan. When and if he does locate 'em, offer to buy the Wineglass. Between you and Johnny and Bud, you should be able to swing it. And if Jaeger and Cutts try and move in, call 'em. Make 'em show their authority for taking over the Wineglass . . . For just as shore as you and me are sitting here, they're going to try it."

"Correct again, Buck," Morgan grunted. "One hundred per cent. I'll do it. I'll have Curt Wallace on the job first thing in the morning. I know Bud and Johnny will see the right of this. They'll back our hand all the way. What started you thinking this thing out?"

"When Jaeger tried that proposition last night," answered Buck. "Most of it hit me all in a bunch, right then and there. That was what made me take such a long chance to break free. I didn't give much of a whoop what happened until that thought hit me."

Morgan stood up. "I'll be drifting. You making out all right?"

"Sure. I can take care of myself. I always was more or less of a night hawk. I'll probably drop in some night and see you."

"You take it easy," warned Morgan. "You know what a bloodhound Brood Shotwell is. He'll stick after you till hell freezes."

Buck laughed softly. "He'll have to ride faster and further and jump quicker than he ever did before in his life, to get me. By the way, Bill, if a bronc or two of yours turns up missing every now and then, don't

get excited. You'll know who's riding them."

"Help yourself, kid. I'll pass that word to Johnny and Bud, too. Watch yourself. Don't take any long chances. And trust me to start things swinging. So long."

They shook hands again and Morgan was soon lost in the night. Buck whistling softly between his teeth, went back into the rock outcropping which surrounded Indian Spring, swung astride his grullo and lifted the reins. When he turned in that night to get a couple of hours sleep, he was a good ten miles from Indian Spring.

IN the chill grayness of the desert dawn, Buck cooked and ate a meager breakfast, saddled the grullo and struck out, riding a wide, watchful circle. He was not underestimating the resourceful stubbornness of Brood Shotwell. Shotwell was a born man-hunter and had grown old and grizzled at the game. There were few tricks of the trade he didn't know. He was a fox who would bear watching.

Yet, even with the knowledge that Shotwell would be riding and looking and watching all the time, Buck was cheerful. Back there in jail, before the great light had burst upon him, Buck's spirits had been plenty low. It had seemed that he was so hemmed in with the withes and tithes of law, he didn't have a ghost of a show. What was the use? He had asked himself. Everything was set against him; there wasn't a loop-hole; the case was hopeless.

But when his mind had grasped the significance of Jaeger's scheme, he had galvanized to a new courage, a new determination. He had made his getaway and was now riding the free, open world. And he had, through good old Bill Morgan, set machinery in motion which Jaeger and Cutts would find mighty hard to stop. Also, gleaming far out in the future somewhere, still a little indistinct and uncertain, but visible nevertheless, was a star of hope for his own future. When the J Bar C had its hand called, facts which would exonerate him might come to light. And a man of twenty-six, with the good red tide of blood running strong in his veins, knows the value of freedom.

Buck whistled as he rode, welcoming the warm beat of the morning sun. He found a strange and exhilarating satisfaction in watching the sage wrens flit here and there and an occasional jackrabbit scud fleetly away.

Noon found him some half dozen miles north of the Wineglass headquarters, and at midafternoon he was less than two hundred yards from the ranch buildings, flattened out on his stomach in a patch of thigh-deep wild oats which fringed the top of a low ridge. In the gully in back of the ridge, the grullo Indian pony stood ground-reined, rolling its bit ring busily as it grazed.

Buck could hardly have told why he had come to this place. It wasn't the safest thing to do by any means. The far reaches of Big Sage Desert were a much more secure sanctuary for a man who had Sheriff Brood Shotwell on his trail. But Buck was young and restless. And he was eager to be somewhere near the center of the fight.

He peered cautiously through the tawny wild oats, watching the ranch buildings below. Except for a single horse, standing ground-reined in the shade of a feed shed, the Wineglass seemed deserted. Buck wondered who the owner of that horse would be. Ben Sloan had only kept two regular riders, picking up three or four more during roundup and branding, then laying them off when the rush was over. These two regulars had been Dave Wagg and Curly Jenkins. Perhaps that horse down there belonged to one of them.

Buck soon saw that was not the case. A hulking, bulky shouldered figure left the ranchhouse and sauntered over to the ground-reined bronco. He took something out of the saddlebags, then started back toward the house once more.

Buck stiffened, and a growl of fury rose in his throat. He knew that man. All through the long, depressing hours of the trial, that fellow had been one of twelve whom Buck had watched and wondered at. The fellow was Toad Black, one of the jurymen who had adjudged Buck guilty of murder.

WHAT was Toad Black doing out here at the Wineglass? He had never, at any time, worked for Ben Sloan. Yet he was apparently just hanging around down

there killing time. Maybe he had been sent out to guard the place. Maybe Jaeger had sent him out.

While Buck was pondering this, Black came to a halt beside the ranchhouse and built a cigarette. As Buck watched him, Black suddenly twisted his head looked hard out to the west, then ducked swiftly from sight.

Buck's glance immediately followed that look Black had thrown. Out there, coming straight for the ranch buildings, some four or five hundred yards distant, was a rider on a liver and white pinto bronc. It was a slim rider, wearing a white shirt and a new, white Stetson hat. As Buck frowned in his wonderment, the pinto dipped into a little hollow and out of sight.

When the pinto next appeared Buck got a new start. That rider was a woman. No mistake about it. And she was a stranger. No woman Buck knew on the Twin Buttes range, and he knew them all, wore riding breeches, high, glossy Cordovan boots and a white silk blouse. But this woman did. By the sheen of the material, even at a distance, Buck knew that blouse was silk.

Whoever it was, he bet she'd be pretty. She sure made a nice picture on that pinto, sitting her saddle with an easy, straight-backed grace.

Not until she had pulled to a halt before the ranchhouse and was about to dismount, did Buck remember Toad Black! Then he lunged to his knees.

But ingrained caution dropped him flat again. This was no business of his. Maybe she had arranged to meet Black here at the deserted Wineglass headquarters. Yet, somehow, Buck knew that couldn't be true. What decent woman would have anything to do with Toad Black? A big, black-browed, lowering brute of a man, with a flat face and horrible, bulbous eyes . . .

The girl walked into the house, moving with a free slender grace. She had taken off her hat just before going out of sight, and in that brief glimpse Buck saw that her hair was very dark and that the sun shone on it.

Buck stared at the ranchhouse intently, frowning. He was of half a mind to throw caution to the wind and go down there. More than once he'd heard stories about Toad Black. Maybe—

Buck lunged clear to his feet this time.

For, carrying up the slope to him had come the thin, high panic of a woman's scream—and there was utter terror in the sound!

The next instant Buck was racing down the slope.

Chapter IV

TIGER MAN

BUCK COMSTOCK was less than a hundred yards from the Wineglass ranchhouse when a thought struck him that sent a trickle of ice up his backbone, turned his mouth to a parched leathery dryness. Maybe this whole set-up was a trap. Maybe he had not been unobserved. Maybe there were other men in that ranchhouse besides Toad Black, men looking at him over gun sights this very moment. Maybe within the next stride or two a blast of venomous lead would rip his life out.

Buck's brain numbed at the possibility. Yet, he realized, if he had been tricked, there was nothing he could do about it now. He couldn't go back. He was in the open. It was farther back to the top of the ridge than to the ranchhouse. He had to gamble that the scream had been genuine. So he drove on.

Again sounded the forlorn, hopeless, terrified cry. Now Buck knew he hadn't been tricked. There was no falsity, no pretense in it. The mortal fear in that scream was stark, heart-rending. Buck's eyes turned bleak and savage.

He raced toward the door. Suddenly a tangle of fighting figures spun through the doorway, out into the white, searching sunlight.

The girl seemed incredibly frail in the pawing clutches of that hulking beast, Toad Black. Already he had torn one sleeve completely off her blouse; the white, soft curves of her arm were banded with red and black where the clawing fingers of Black had bruised her flesh. At this moment he had her by both slim shoulders, trying to drag her close to him. His horrible, protruding eyes and lecherous mouth mocked her as she fought.

A feral, red haze swept across Buck Comstock's gaze, and through it he could see but one object—that face of Toad Black. Buck forgot he had guns at his

hips, forgot everything but a savage, crazy desire to kill and crush that man with his bare hands.

Then he was close behind the struggling girl, looking into the startled eyes of Toad Black. The next moment Buck hit the fellow, his fist traveling right over the top of the girl's dark head.

Buck put everything he had into that punch. He knew a wild joy as he felt his knuckles bite into Toad Black's face, felt them split the flesh. Toad Black had let go of the girl as he saw that blow start, throwing up both hairy paws in a futile effort to ward it off. And now, under the lethal drive of the punch, he tottered backward, slammed against the wall of the ranchhouse, dropped to his knees and fell over sideways.

Buck swept the startled girl aside with his arm. He lunged forward. Black wasn't out. He was clawing for the gun at his hip. Buck kicked out violently, viciously. The toe of his boot caught Black on the forearm, and the brute's gun flipped harmlessly to one side. Then, his hands clawing and reaching, Buck went for the fellow's throat.

TOAD BLACK still had fight in him. In that big, hulking bulk of his lay a frightful reservoir of brute strength. He ward off Buck's reaching fingers, rolled over with surprising speed and lunged to his feet.

Black's face was a gory pulp from that first punch. His froggy eyes seemed to protrude more than ever. His yellow teeth showed beneath his flattened nose in a simian snarl. With both huge arms clubbed and swinging, he rushed at Buck.

Buck side-stepped and his fist drove out in a rapier-like blow that nearly tore Black's ear off. Black gave a weird, coughing bawl of fury as he staggered wildly, again thrown off balance by the power of Buck's lashing fist. He was like nothing so much as a mad, wounded gorilla.

Buck slithered after him and caught him again as he was turning. His knuckles laid Black's left cheek open from temple to chin. Black knew he had never hit any man so hard in his life, yet somehow, Black kept his feet. It was like battering at something inhuman.

Buck moved in, trying for a clear shot at the point of Black's jaw. And one of the renegade's wildly clubbing fists caught him on the side of the head. The white fire of agony bathed Buck from head to toe, his senses reeling and crazy lights blazing before his eyes. It was as if he had been struck with a post maul.

Instinct alone caused Buck to duck. For a reeling moment it seemed as if he had been scalped as another whizzing fist skimmed across the top of his head. Then Black caught him and dragged him close.

Only the utter fury which blinded the renegade at the moment kept Buck from being broken and trampled like a reed. But Toad Black now was like a beast gone mad. He tore and clawed at Buck like a wild animal. And he was snarling bestially. Blood from his split and pulped face drenched both men, and its raw stench was sickening.

Strangely enough, this shaking and slamming around had the effect of clearing Buck's tortured head. And Buck's rage and fury flared up anew as Black tried for a wicked blow with one knee. Buck twisted his hips aside, suddenly dropped both fists and sank them deep into Black's gross stomach.

He knew, with savage exultancy, that those blows had hurt Black—hurt him plenty. He pumped more into the same spot, and Black, groaning and retching, gave ground. Buck swarmed after him, smashing savagely in the body. Black backed, spreading both hairy paws across his stomach in an effort to halt that punishment, which seemed about to tear him in half.

Buck switched his attack, drove a ripping left into Black's face. The blow hurled the renegade again against the side of the ranchhouse. As he struggled to catch his wind, his sagging jaw loomed fair and open. Power swept up Buck Comstock's lean body, rippled up from his very heels, arcing through straightening knees, narrow hips and wide, driving shoulders. And the end of that surge of power was Buck's right fist, finding the very point of Toad Black's jaw. The sound was as if a stout board had been split. Black's feet crossed, he spun half around and dropped with a crash. And he lay like a dead man.

BUCK staggered back. He, himself, almost went down. His knees were trembling, his feet clumsy and uncertain. Those few mad moments of furious combat seemed to have drained every atom of strength from him. He stood there, weaving, gulping hoarsely for air, his sweat-filled eyes staring at the crumpled bulk of Toad Black. For the moment he had forgotten about the girl.

Then her hand was on his arm, and he turned slowly. She was crying soundlessly, tears rolling down her cheeks. Her lips opened and closed, as though she were trying to say something, but no words came.

Buck shook himself, managed a lop-sided grin. "'S all right—now," he panted. "Everything's—all right. That hog—won't come back for quite some time. It was like—hitting a stone wall. Don't cry, lady—you're safe enough now."

Abruptly he realized that she was staring at him, her wide eyes shocked, almost unbelieving. "You!" she gasped. "Y—you. You're Buck Comstock, the man who—who killed my uncle. The man who broke jail!"

Now Buck recognized her. This was the girl who had stood between Leek Jaeger and Frank Cutts and had recoiled at the sight of him as Brood Shotwell and Spike St. Ives had led him from the courtroom after Judge Henning had pronounced sentence.

The lop-sided grin left Buck's face. Stern gravity took its place. He moved a little apart from her. And he nodded slowly. "Yes," he said. "I am Buck Comstock."

Her hands, trembling a little, were pressed against her lips, while the look in her eyes made Buck shake himself.

"Don't look at me like that," he said harshly. "If Ben Sloan was your uncle I know what you're thinking. You'd be bound to think that. And I can't blame you. Yet, no matter what lies Jaeger and Cutts might have put in your ears, please remember that there are two sides to everything. I'm not as black as they've painted me."

The recollection that he was standing in the open, free to the sight of anyone, came to him. He looked around, searching the distance in every direction. But everywhere the range lay empty, white and

empty under the sun. He took another deep, slow breath, and new energy and strength flowed through him.

He turned to Toad Black, who had not moved. With piggin' strings taken from his pocket, Buck pulled Black's thick wrists behind him and tied them securely. Then he straightened up and rolled a cigarette.

In all this time he had not looked at the girl again. But now, for a second time, her hand fell on his arm. He looked down at her, his face set and wary.

"Well?" He could not keep the harshness out of his tone.

She spoke with simple honesty. "Regardless of what else may have happened, in this you were splendid, Buck Comstock. I want you to know that I thank you—sincerely. If you had not come to aid me . . ." She broke off, shuddering.

Some of the bleakness went out of Buck's face. "Forget it," he said. "Any decent man would have done the same. And now, if you don't mind, I'll be getting out of here. I can't afford to stay here, in the open. I'm taking Toad Black out of here. I got use for that hombre."

He stalked off to the feed shed and got Toad Black's horse. When he returned, Black was stirring. Buck caught him by the shoulder, hauled him to a sitting position. He jabbed a gun in Black's ribs.

"Get up," he rasped. "You're going with me. Try any fuss and I won't waste a lick of time on you."

Toad Black lurched upright. But there was no fight or truculence in him now. He was craven, shrunken, and a great fear showed in his swollen, blackened eyes. Buck took the lariat from Black's own saddle, dropped a loop over the fellow's head, drew it snug about his beefy throat, then tied the other end to the saddle horn. He picked up the reins of Black's horse and swung astride it. "March!" he ordered. "Right up over yonder ridge."

"Wait!" cried the girl. "I want to talk to you, Buck Comstock."

"Not here," replied Buck. "With Brood Shotwell looking for me, I got to get out of sight."

"Then," declared the girl, "I'll ride over that ridge, too."

Buck did not look back, but he knew she was astride the pinto, following him. This was a mixup, for fair. She had said

that Ben Sloan was her uncle. Buck stiffened slightly. If that was the case, then undoubtedly she was heir to the Wineglass ranch!

Chapter V

KILLER'S CONFESSION

AT THE top of the ridge Buck made another survey of the range. All was bland and peaceful and empty. He rode down the other side, to the point where his own horse was grazing, with Toad Black stumbling ahead.

"Lie down," Buck ordered Black curtly. "Lie down and stay there. I'll be keeping my eye on you."

He dismounted, went to his own horse and slid the Winchester rifle from its boot. Then he turned to the girl, who was watching him inscrutably.

"I'll have to ask you to leave your pinto here and climb back to the top of that ridge on foot, if you want to talk with me," he said. "I got to keep watch, and I can't let anybody see me."

The girl did not hesitate. She slid to the ground and marched sturdily along beside him as they climbed to the screen of wild oats atop the ridge. When Buck flattened out, she crouched beside him.

"All right," drawled Buck. "Fire away. If I don't look at you, don't think I won't be listening. But I got to keep watching."

She was silent for a time, and Buck glanced at her questioningly. She was, he thought, even prettier than she had seemed that first time he had seen her. The trig riding outfit she wore was especially becoming.

"That was a very brave and unselfish thing to do, Buck Comstock, coming to my aid as you did," she said suddenly. "For all you knew, you might have ridden straight into a situation that would have put you back behind the bars. Yet you didn't hesitate."

Buck stirred restlessly. "Maybe if that thought had hit me in time, I wouldn't have jumped in so quick. But hearing you scream. . . Well, I didn't stop to think."

Again she was quiet for a long moment. Her voice was not quite steady as she asked a question: "You did kill Ben Sloan, didn't you?"

"Yes," said Buck, meeting her level gaze. "I killed him."

"Mur—murdered him?"

"No! In this country, when a man has to kill in defense of his own life, it isn't called murder—and it isn't murder. That is what I did. Ben Sloan came for me, rolling smoke. I did only what any other sane man would do. I shot to keep from being shot. Ben Sloan missed. I didn't. That is the truth, if it was ever spoken."

"The jury—"

"Toad Black—that damned animal that was after you—he was on that jury," broke in Buck.

"I see," she said slowly. "I do see. I—I believe you, Buck Comstock."

There was no particular reason that Buck could see why these words should make him feel good. Yet they did. He turned his head, smiled at her. "That's swell. It means a lot to have you say that, Miss—"

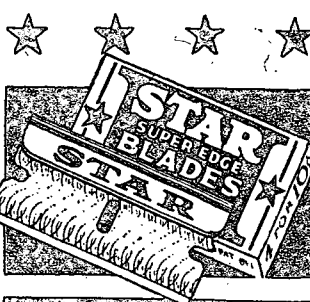
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She colored slightly. "Harper," she said. "Jean Harper. Ben Sloan was the only brother of my dead step-father. Ben Sloan was not really my uncle, except by law. At that, I am the only known living kin of Ben Sloan."

"Which makes you owner of the Wineglass spread," said Buck softly.

"Yes. I had no idea that Ben Sloan owned any property—nor any idea where he was, for that matter. I didn't even know if he was still alive. Then Mr. Jaeger got in touch with me and had me come here."

"And now he wants to buy the Wineglass spread from you," Buck added flatly.

She looked at him keenly. "How did you know?"

Buck laughed. "Because that would be exactly in line with what he's scheming to do. How much did he offer you for the place?"

She hesitated, then her lips tightened. "I don't know that I should—"

"Of course," growled Buck. "Forget I asked that. Let me give you a little advice, though. Get the help of some reliable cattleman on the proposition before you sell. Or else Jaeger and Cutts will rob you blind. Go have a talk with Bill Morgan or Johnny Frazier or Bud Tharp. They'll give you a good square estimate on what you should get for your spread."

THE girl stared thoughtfully at the ground, her smooth brow corrugated in a frown. "What," she demanded suddenly, "would you say the Wineglass ranch is worth?"

"Not a cent less than twenty thousand dollars," answered Buck.

"Twenty thousand dollars!" She stared at him aghast. "Why Mr. Jaeger only offered six thousand. And I thought that was an awful lot of money."

"It is, until it's applied as a price against the Wineglass. Then it becomes robbery. I don't know exactly how many cattle are packing the Wineglass iron, but I got a reasonable idea—and I know the kind of range it is and what the possibilities of that range are. You wouldn't be getting a cent too much at twenty thousand."

Buck twisted around and looked back down into the hollow at Toad Black. The

renegade was lying flat on the ground, making no move to get away.

"I suppose you're wondering why I wanted to come up here and speak to you," said the girl, "when you admit that you—well, came off victor in a shooting scrape with my uncle."

"That's right," nodded Buck. "I am."

"I'll tell you," she said in sudden decision. "At first it was pure impulse, I suppose, born of the fact that you saved me from that beast. Now—there is something about you, Buck, Comstock, which invites confidence. I suppose I should hate you, fear you, despise you, if only for the memory of Ben Sloan. But I don't. After all, Ben Sloan was little more than a name to me. You—you were terrific down there. And I must talk to someone. You see, I do not trust either Mr. Jaeger or Mr. Cutts."

"Good girl," drawled Buck. "You got savvy. Go on."

"Even from the first, it seemed strange to me that Jaeger and Cutts—total strangers—should go to the trouble of having me traced, so that they could notify me of this inheritance. When I first met them I did not feel any more confidence about them. And, even though six thousand dollars seems an awful lot of money to me, there was something about Jaeger when he made the offer—an eagerness, a greedy eagerness and a filmed cunning in eyes—that I did not miss.

"I asked them to take me out to the Wineglass to look the place over, but both he and Cutts always had some excuse to keep me away from it. One of their arguments was that you were on the loose. They would have had me believe that you were some terrifying dragon who might eat alive any woman you met. But their excuses were not very convincing. And today I managed to slip away from the J Bar C while both Jaeger and Cutts were in town. I met a cowboy out on the range and asked him how to get to the Wineglass. You know what happened then."

"It fits in with the rest of the picture—perfect," mused Buck softly. He looked directly into the girl's questing, measuring eyes, and he spoke crisply. "Miss Harper, I know Leek Jaeger and Frank Cutts a lot better than you do. There's neither truth nor honor in either of them. They'd

doublecross their own mothers—or skin a flea for its hide and tallow.

"You're staying at the J Bar C. Leave there right away. Go into town and stay at Joe Lester's hotel. If you intend to sell the Wineglass, let a competent lawyer handle the deal for you. I can recommend Curt Wallace. He's young, but he's square and he's no man's fool. If you think you'd like to hold on to the Wineglass and operate it, get in touch with Bill Morgan and ask his advice. They don't come any better than Bill, and he knows the cattle business both ways from the ace. If you follow his advice, you can't go wrong. And Bill would be more than glad to help you out."

The girl stared thoughtfully out into the distance. She nodded slowly. "Thanks, Buck Comstock. I'll do as you say. . . . Now I'll be riding. As I said before, I *should* hate and fear you. But, somehow, I don't. And thanks again—for what you did down there at the ranch."

"If you want to do me a favor," drawled Buck, "say nothing to anyone about any of this."

"Of course," she nodded. "I understand. Goodbye."

SHORTLY BEFORE midnight, Buck Comstock was again on the prowl. On foot, he was reconnoitering the Circle Star. Well back from the ranchhouse, out on the empty range, two ground-reined horses stood, while in the dew-wet grass beside them lay Toad Black, firmly trussed, hand and foot.

The Circle Star ranchhouse was dark. Finally Buck reached Bones Baker's window, where he knocked softly at the glass. Bones roused and the window slid up. "That you, Buck?" he asked guardedly.

"Right, Bones. Let me in. I want to talk to Bill."

In another minute the three of them were gathered in the cook's room. Bones hung a blanket over the window before lighting his lamp. "I got news for you, Bill," said Buck.

"That goes double, kid," Morgan grunted. "I got news for you. You remember that girl that was with Jaeger and Cutts in the courtroom? Well, she's—"

"Ben Sloan's heir," Buck finished, with a grin.

Bill Morgan stared at him. "How the hell did you find that out?"

"Had a long talk with the lady, in person, today," Buck drawled. "Listen while I spin it."

He told the story of the afternoon's happenings in brief, terse words. "So I told her to get loose from Jaeger and Cutts and stay in town at the hotel," he ended. "I told her to let Curt Wallace handle her affairs and to call on you, Bill, for advice. She promised she would. Tomorrow you ram right into town and have a talk with her."

"I'll do it," nodded Morgan. "But you—if you ain't got the damndest knack of bumping into things I ever saw!"

"What did yuh do with Toad Black?" asked Bones eagerly. "Take him out an' kill him?"

"Hardly," Buck chuckled. "Dead, he wouldn't be worth a plugged dime to anybody. Alive, he can be made to talk. I got sense enough to know that I can't keep on dodging Brood Shotwell forever. Some way or other, I got to clear myself, according to law. If I can prove that some member of that jury—Toad Black, for instance—was approached by Leek Jaeger or Frank Cutts and was paid or bribed to vote me guilty, then the whole trial can be thrown out and I can get a new shake. But I can't go on dragging Black around with me—not while I'm on the dodge. I got to leave him somewhere in safe keeping. How about it, Bill? Can you take care of him for me?"

It was Bones Baker who answered. "You bet. Bring him in, cowboy. I'll keep him in my spud cellar. How about it, boss?"

Bill Morgan grinned and nodded. "Think you can handle him, Bones?"

"Handle him!" snorted Bones. "Wait and see. He tries gettin' ructious with me and I'll pin his ears back five times a day. I'd enjoy curryin' that hombre down with a pick-handle."

Bill Morgan went out with Buck to bring in the horses and Toad Black. Bones swore in sublime amazement as he viewed Black's face. "Holy hen-hawks!" he exploded. "You musta had a rock in each fist, Buck!"

"It's a wonder I didn't bust my hands all to hell and gone," grinned Buck. "He

was tough. He took a lot of slappin' before he went down. Okay, Bones. He's all yours."

Bones pulled his big six-shooter out of his blankets. "Startin' now," he proclaimed, "one Toad Black disappears from the world of men. March, you pug-ugly blister, an' do exactly as you're told. Else you'll think all hell an' half of purgatory is crawlin' your frame."

Chapter VI

WAR ON WOMEN

JEAN HARPER knew a sense of relief when she got back to the J Bar C ranchhouse and found that Jaeger and Cutts had not yet returned from town. There were several of the J Bar C punchers down around the corrals, but she managed to keep her left side toward them, so they would not see that her right arm was bare, that a sleeve had been torn from her silk blouse. She did not stop at the corrals to leave her pinto; she knew someone would take care of the animal even if she left it in front of the ranchhouse.

She could not afford to have questions asked as to what had happened and why her blouse was torn that way. Hence her relief on finding the ranchhouse empty as she hurried to the room that had been given her by Leek Jaeger. There she stripped off the offending blouse, wadded it up and thrust it into a far corner of one of her traveling bags. She took a cold bath, and viewed with shudders of repugnance the darkening bruises on the soft flesh of her arms and shoulders where the clawing fingers of Toad Black had touched.

Yet, right after this wave of repugnance, came a warm and truant thrill. She was thinking of Buck Comstock, of the flaming, thrilling ferocity of him as he had beaten down Toad Black.

She could hardly understand this thrill. By all rights, she should fear Buck Comstock—fear and hate and despise him. He had killed her uncle, Ben Sloan. He admitted that. He had been judged guilty by a jury and had been sentenced to twenty-five years in a penitentiary. But he had broken jail, and was a hunted man now, an outlaw.

In the world in which Jean Harper had

lived, all these things would put a man so far beyond the pale that no decent person would give him a kind thought. This, however, was a different world, out here in the far-flung cattle country. It was a different world entirely, where men and their acts were gauged and measured by another set of standards. Out here, apparently, if a man killed another in self-defense, it left no stain upon him.

Dimly, for there was still much for her to learn and unlearn about this western world, Jean Harper could perceive something of the spirit and elemental reasoning of the cattle country. Already it was affecting her, opening her eyes, widening her perceptions. In one thing, of course, there was no difference between the world she had known and this one she now lived in. Men were the same. Some were honest, some dishonest; some good, others bad; some brave, and some cowardly.

It had, Jean Harper decided, taken a lot of courage for Buck Comstock to do what he had done, to disregard his own danger entirely and leap to the aid of an utter stranger. That very act might have cost him his liberty, even his life. But he had not hesitated. Surely no man who would do that could be vicious or unprincipled.

Her eyes shone warmly as she pictured those terrible moments. What a literal tiger Buck Comstock had been as he smashed Toad Black into insensibility! She could see him now as he had been just before she left him—the lean, hard, muscular brownness of his clean-cut face and jaw; the alert, cool clearness of his gray eyes, which crinkled at the corners when he smiled.

She wondered now about all those personal things she had told him—a total stranger, met for the first time in her life. Of course, impulse had had something to do with that—impulse born from the emotional hurricane she had been through. Yet there must also have been some instinctive realization of honor and trust in his makeup. It was all very strange and bewildering. At the moment, Jean Harper was not exactly sure that she, herself, knew the reason for her confidence in him.

IT WAS after dark when Leek Jaeger and Frank Cutts returned from town. Jaeger was plainly out of sorts, but Cutts,

whatever his feelings were, masked them behind that cold, set, gambler's face of his.

Jean had already eaten. She came into the room just as the two partners were finishing their meal. At her entrance, Leek Jaeger's head jerked up and his eyes held a real impact as they reached her.

"I understand you took a long ride this afternoon," he growled. "I thought I told you not to."

Jean drew herself up coldly. "As your guest, Mr. Jaeger, I fail to understand either your tone or your meaning. Are you trying to say that I am subject to your orders?"

Hot blood rushed to Jaeger's heavy face. It took a very obvious effort on his part to swallow the words that were on his lips and substitute less offensive ones.

"I didn't mean that the way it sounded, Miss Harper," he blurted. "Only, you're here as a guest of Frank and me and, naturally, we feel a responsibility for your safety. You don't know the kind of country this is, or the kind of men in it. You shouldn't go on long rides alone."

Frank Cutts nodded. "Leek is right, Miss Harper," he said in his cold, measured tones.

Standing at the edge of the lamp glow at that moment, Jean Harper was a decidedly handsome picture. She had donned a soft, grey dress, a simple thing of flowing lines which brought out the cool, clean slenderness of her. Her dark, erect head was touched with glints of dusted gold by the lamplight, and there was quick color in her cheeks.

Cutts, looking at her, knew a sudden stirring of his pulse. For a brief second the practiced curtain of his eyes was lowered and something from the cold core of the man leered out.

"No," he said, his voice less chilly and brittle than before. "We wouldn't want anything to harm you."

"You can rest your fears," said Jean. "I can take care of myself. I rode out to the Wineglass headquarters."

This shot told. Both Jaeger and Cutts stiffened. "Yes?" murmured Cutts.

"Yes," the girl retorted. "And I have decided that I do not care to sell the ranch. Instead, I am going to operate it."

"You!" ejaculated Leek Jaeger. "You operate the Wineglass spread?" He leaned back and laughed. "That's foolishness."

Angry lights danced in Jean Harper's eyes. "Mr. Jaeger, I distinctly resent your words and your tone. Anyone would think that you had some kind of authority over me. You haven't. None. You make it impossible for me to remain in this house any longer. The first thing in the morning I am removing to town, to the hotel."

She turned then and swept out of the room. In the distance of the house, the room to her door closed emphatically.

Frank Cutts looked at Leek Jaeger in swift anger and disgust. "Sometimes I wonder how in hell you ever got as far in the world as you have, Leek. You got brains, but there's times when any man would doubt it. You sure made a mess of that."

"I don't see it," blurted Jaeger. "I only—"

Cutts spread his hands in exaggerated weariness. "You never admit you're wrong. But you've been wrong in a couple of ways, lately. The first blunder was in trying to proposition Buck Comstock that night in jail. You spread our hand right in front of him, showed him every card. Comstock is no fool. That's another mistake you always make. You think nobody can see through your deals but yourself. But Comstock did. He made a desperate play at a getaway as soon as you had spread your sign. He got away. And he's got friends, powerful friends. You can bet he's seen some of them, talked with them. Why have Morgan and Frazier and Tharp all sent out calls for extra riders? They're not branding or rounding up. I know the answer, and so do you. And it's your fault."

"All right. All right," snarled Jaeger. "Let it go at that. I dragged my rope on that play. But this damn girl—"

"You've made her mad. Once she leaves this house, there'll be a lot of other people talk to her. Maybe some of Comstock's friends will talk with her. Maybe they have already, seeing that she's decided she doesn't want to sell the Wineglass. What's the answer?"

"I'll bite," grunted Jaeger. "What is it?"

Cutts stood up, took a turn about the

room. "All my life I've gambled," he said. "I never dodged the stakes, no matter how high they went. And whenever I picked up a hand and decided to back it, I backed it to the limit. I'm backing this hand we hold. I'm going to play it to the limit. I'll bet as long as my chips last. And then I'll bluff. In other words, the thing we've worked and planned to do, is going to be done. Possession of the Wine-glass is vital. We've got to have it. That girl has got to change her mind. . . . She's going to change her mind."

"That won't be as easy as it sounds," Jaeger growled. "She ain't got that haughty chin for nothing. And she'll be leaving us in the morning."

"No, she won't," said Cutts softly.

Jaeger jerked his head up, staring at Cutts. "Go on," he purred.

CUTTS spoke in low, swift tones. When he had finished, Leek Jaeger sat motionless, his heavy features set, his little, leaden eyes staring and unwinking. Presently he cleared his throat with a harsh, rasping sound.

"That will mean all of our chips go on one hand," he said thickly. "Hell will split wide open if there's any kind of a slip."

"There won't be any slip," said Cutts. "Not if you'll keep your mouth shut and let me handle this. No man ever made a plan work if he stopped halfway. And no plan ever works as smooth as it first figures out. But we still hold high cards if we got nerve to back 'em all the way."

Jaeger nodded abruptly. "Fair enough. I'll go you."

A minute later a knock sounded on the door of Jean Harper's room. "This is Cutts, Miss Harper. Could Mr. Jaeger and I see you for another minute? Leek is sorry he spoke as he did, and we have another proposition to make you on your ranch."

Jean was of two minds for a moment. Somehow, her distrust of the two men had grown tremendously since her meeting with Buck Comstock. At the same time, anything additional which she might learn of their scheming might prove useful later. There could be no harm in listening to what they had to propose. She opened the door.

"Very well," she said. "But I want no more insults from Jaeger."

"There'll be none," promised Cutts.

He walked beside her, and somehow it came to Jean that there was something of the prowling of a jungle animal in the stride of Frank Cutts. At the door of the dining room, he stepped aside to let her enter.

In there was Leek Jaeger, holding a colorful Navajo blanket in his hands, examining some of the figuration. As she entered, Jaeger looked up with what was plainly meant for a placating grin. He held the blanket out to her.

"Here's a peace offering, Miss Harper," he said. "Please accept it with my compliments."

Jean, a trifle taken aback, was non-plussed for a moment. She hesitated, then stepped forward, her hands outstretched. "Thank you, Mr. Jaeger. This is kind of you."

At that moment, with a move that was lightning fast for one of his bulk, Leek Jaeger threw the blanket over her head. From behind, the arms of Frank Cutts dropped about her, tightening like steel bands. A moment later, blinded, half-smothered in the folds of the blanket, Jean Harper was helpless, arms and ankles tightly bound, the blanket pulled tightly against her mouth to stifle any outcry.

CHAPTER VII

A GUN IN THE DARK

FOR three days, Buck Comstock passed no word with any human being. He spent most of his time well back in the vast shelter of Big Sage Desert. He never camped twice in the same place. Each tiny fire he built for cooking spread its ashes where no ashes had lain before; each time Buck lay down to sleep his blankets covered ground never touched by blankets before.

Long hours each day he spent with a pair of binoculars, which had been given him by Bill Morgan, studying the surrounding country, alert for every foreign movement or sign of riders. Twice he saw riders, and each time, leading them, was a man on a big, white horse. Buck knew that horse. It belonged to Brood Shotwell.

Shotwell was a stubborn, tenacious man-hunter, but now he was up against a fugitive who knew every corner of his territory, who took genuine pleasure in laying false trails and blotting out the real ones. At no time did Shotwell come even close to finding Buck.

Out there in the desert, Buck had plenty of time for thought. In that solitude and stillness, Buck's concentration became such that he saw the scheme of Jaeger and Cutts with steadily growing clearness, and his conviction as to their ultimate purpose became certain.

Not all of his thoughts, however, moved about this one subject. With increasing frequency, Jean Harper intruded into his cogitations. It gave him a strange, warm pleasure to think of her. Again and again, he lived over those momentous minutes after he had heard her scream at the Wineglass ranchhouse. It seemed that he could feel again the impact of his clenched fists against Toad Black's brutal face and gross body. He felt a savage satisfaction in the knowledge that he had beaten and punished Black. And he remembered Jean Harper as she had looked, standing there beside him, her hand on his arm, right after Toad Black had gone down to stay.

He could feel the warm seep of blood into his bronzed cheeks as he recalled the truant impulse of that moment. Somehow, he had wanted to take her into his arms, to comfort her and quiet her, much as he would have a frightened, weeping child. But she had recognized him then and drawn away from him, with a look of horror in her eyes.

Yet, before she had left him, she had shown remarkable common sense, had viewed the death of Ben Sloan with open mind, and had seemed to understand the provocation which lay behind the fatal gun-play. After that she had talked with him, really confided in him, and had agreed to accept his advice. And when she had left him, it was almost as a friend, agreeing to tell no one that she had met him out there at the Wineglass headquarters.

These memories gave Buck a measure of satisfaction during the lonely hours of his exile. And out of them came an ever

growing desire to see and speak to this girl again, this girl with the ebon hair and the enchanting slimness. . . . He must, at least, get some news of her.

So it was that, in the thick, warm dusk of the third day, Buck rode cautiously down upon the Circle Star headquarters. As before, he left his pony well back from the buildings and went in on foot. Abruptly he halted, crouched low and dead still, there in the darkness. In front of the Circle Star were many horses and men.

Buck's mind raced. Who could they be and what were they here for? Had something happened to Bill Morgan? Or maybe Jaeger and Cutts had already started their invasion of Coyote Valley, and these were the riders of the Coyote Valley ranches gathered to organize for battle.

Either way, Buck had to know what it meant. His heart and his interests were bound to Bill Morgan and the rest, and he had to be in on it, too, if it was coming to open range war. Daring decision took hold of him. He circled the house, a noiseless, low-crouched shadow.

Buck knew the Circle Star ranchhouse. On the blind side of the house he tried two windows, found the second partially open. With slow, steady pressure, he pushed the sash up enough to wriggle through.

Once inside, he pulled off his boots, then felt his way through two rooms. On the far side of the second was a door with lines of yellow light across the top and bottom. Buck crept close to it, pressed his ear to the door and listened. Voices were speaking beyond that door.

BUCK recognized Brood Shotwell's cold, heavy tones: "This range has gone nuts, I tell you, Morgan. Here the first trouble with Comstock. Now Toad Black has disappeared, complete, and that Harper girl has vanished into thin air. God knows what will happen next! Damned if I'm not beginning to get spooky, myself."

Bill Morgan answered him: "Toad Black don't count, Brood. He was only a drifter, anyhow, not worth the powder to blow him to hell. Probably, realizing that he shared responsibility for the damndest legal farce I ever heard of, or you

either, and fearing that retribution might catch up with him, he's just simply high-tailed it out of the country."

"You're meaning that Comstock trial?" rasped the sheriff.

"I'm meaning exactly that. You've grown old and gray, Brood, dealing with the faults and meannesses of human beings. You can't look me in the eye and tell me that Buck Comstock got a square shake in that trial."

"My office ain't concerned with that angle of law enforcement," Shotwell growled. "I'm not worryin' a lot about Toad Black's disappearance. It's the girl that's got me fightin' my head."

"That is plenty serious," agreed Morgan. "You can't find a trace of her?"

"Not a trace. According to Jaeger and Cutts, she left the J Bar C first thing Tuesday morning, saying she was going to stay at the hotel in town. Somewhere between the J Bar C and town she just vanished into thin air."

"How did the word get out?"

"Leek Jaeger came into town Wednesday with the idea of having another talk with her about the Wineglass. When he asked for her at the hotel, Joe Lester thought he was crazy. Jaeger insisted she'd left the J Bar C Tuesday morning, saying she was going to stay at the hotel. Joe Lester said she hadn't showed up. Then Jaeger came to tell me about it. I been rammin' up and down, back an' forth, ever since. I've had possemen ridin' everywhere. But there ain't a sign of her that we can locate."

"That's bad," said Bill Morgan. "Plenty bad. In this country, we don't bother women. Somebody will get their neck stretched for this."

"You're tellin' me!" exploded Brood Shotwell. "Listen, Morgan, in runnin' my office I try to play the game as impersonal as possible. I don't show sympathies one way or another. But I don't mind tellin' the world that right now I'm just an ordinary man who's madder than hell. If I can get my hands on the polecat who ran off with that nice girl I'll forget all about my star and just take him to pieces with my own bare hands. So far, I been tryin' to pick up Buck Comstock's trail. But Comstock can run around plumb loose,

for all of me, until I find that girl. There's been some talk made. . . ."

Shotwell broke off, as though reluctant to say anything more, but Bill Morgan gave him no chance. "Go on, Brood. What is this talk?"

"Well," grunted Shotwell, "some folks are hintin' that maybe it was Comstock who met up with her an' packed her off."

It was Bill Morgan's turn to explode. "I want somebody to make that crack to me!" he roared. "I'll drive their lyin' words right back through their teeth with a .45 slug. Don't tell me you're big enough fool to believe that."

"I'm not," said Shotwell. "I slapped one jigger down already for telling me that must have happened."

"Who was he?"

"Duke Younger. I'm not exactly soft in the head about Buck Comstock, after the fool he made of me in his getaway, but I've seen too many men shoved all the way to hell by people blaming them for everything that happens after they get into one jam with the law. Buck Comstock might be a smoke-roller, but he's not the sort to harm any woman."

"Brood," said Morgan, "there's been two or three times lately when I was ready to brand you as a knothed. I'm apologizin' for the thought."

Shotwell laughed harshly. "Bein' a sheriff ain't all gravy, Bill. Lots of times you have to do things you ain't no way crazy about. I'm human, same as anybody else, though there's folks who'll try an' tell you different. Well, long as you can't help me about that girl, I'll be draggin' on."

"I'll pass the word to my crew, Brood. I'll keep 'em ridin' an' lookin'. Should they stumble across anything at all, I'll see that you're notified pronto."

"Thanks, Bill. That's fair enough."

Sounded the tramp of spurred heels out to the front of the house. Shortly after came the concerted pound of hoofs vanishing out toward the west.

WHEN Bill Morgan and Bones Baker returned to the room where Bill had talked with Brood Shotwell, they froze in amazement. There, sitting in a chair, was Buck Comstock.

"Where in hell," stuttered Bones, "did you come from?"

Buck jerked his head. "In there. I heard what Shotwell had to say about the disappearance of Miss Harper. Bill, why the devil didn't you go into town Tuesday like I told you to? Then you'd have found she hadn't showed up. And whoever run off with her wouldn't have had a day's start?"

Buck was bleak of eye, his face grim and forbidding.

"I did go in, Buck," replied Morgan quietly. "I spent all of Tuesday morning in town, waiting for her. When she didn't show, I figured maybe she had changed her mind about leaving the J Bar C—at least, leaving it right away. I came home then, not giving it more than a second thought."

"Sorry, Bill," growled Buck. "Only, that news—sort of knocked me for a loop. That's bad, Bill—her disappearance. There's only one answer."

"Jaeger and Cutts, you mean?"

"Exactly. She must have told them that if they wanted the Wineglass they'd have to jump their price. She might have told them she didn't care to sell, that she intended to keep the spread. I wouldn't put it past either of those polecats to have locked her up somewhere to try and make her sign the Wineglass over to them."

"I can see the possibility, all right," said Morgan.

"One more thing, Bill. So far, we been waiting for Jaeger and Cutts to make the first break. We been set for a counter-punch, you might say. It ain't getting us anywhere. What do you say we walk in swinging?"

"If you can pick out a decent angle of attack, I'm willing."

"Good enough. Bones you still got Toad Black?"

"Yup," nodded Bones. "I got him. He made one try to break loose, so I whapped him with a fryin' pan. He's a good dog now. He gets right down on his shins an' starts prayin' when he sees ol' Bones comin' down into the spud cellar."

"You hang onto him. Bill, you and me are heading for town."

"Now?"

"Now. Duke Younger will be hanging around there, most likely, lapping up liquor. I want him. I'm going to get him.

Then I'm going to make him and Toad Black talk. If I have to, I'll burn the truth out of them with hot branding irons. I'm tired of dodging and ducking and hiding out. Long as it was only myself to consider, I didn't mind it so much. But now those damned rats are fighting Jean Harper. And I'm going to get to the bottom of this thing and find that girl. I'm not going to sit back and let time tell the story. I'm going to jam the truth right out into the open. Coming with me, Bill?"

In answer, Bill Morgan lifted his gun belts down from a wall peg and buckled them on.

IT WAS nine o'clock when Buck Comstock and Bill Morgan rode up to the outskirts of Twin Buttes. They reined in, just short of town.

"You ease around and leave your bronc out back of the hotel, Buck," said Morgan. "I'll go straight in and locate Younger. When I've found where he is, I'll meet you in the alley between the hotel and Pete Allen's store. Then we can figure how to get hold of him."

Morgan had no trouble in locating Younger. He was standing at the far end of the bar in the Yellow Horse Saloon. Drinking with him were Leek Jaeger and a man who was a stranger to Morgan. This third man was of average height, compact and wiry of build. A long, livid scar ran across the left side of his face, reminder of a wound which must have been deep enough to shatter the bones of his jaw—for the lower half of his face was queerly drawn and puckered, giving a pointed, rodent suggestion to his mouth. When he spoke, his words carried a strange, whistling sibilance. He was dressed in average range togs, but he carried two big guns, slung low and tied down. Something in the way he stood and moved told Morgan the story. Here was a gunman, if he had ever seen one.

Morgan edged up to the bar, spoke or nodded to various acquaintances, ordered and downed a short whiskey. He let his eyes play along the bar and saw that Jaeger and his two companions were looking at him.

Jaeger called along the bar in affected friendliness: "Come and have one on me,

Bill. I want you to meet a friend of mine."

Morgan elbowed his way over to the three. "Four whiskies," Jaeger called to the bartender. "Bill, meet Whistler Hahn. I reckon you've heard of him. Whistler, this is Bill Morgan."

Bill Morgan had heard of Whistler Hahn, all right. Few men in that section of the country but had. Whistler Hahn was proof to the old adage that a bad reputation travels farther than a good one.

Morgan shook hands with him. "Glad to know you, Hahn."

They downed their drinks. "What do you think about the disappearance of Miss Harper, Bill?" asked Jaeger.

"I don't know what to think," Morgan shrugged. "I can't understand why any man would be low enough to run off with a girl like that."

Duke Younger smirked crudely. "Me, I only saw her once. That was across the courtroom. But I must say it would be a lot easier for a man to run off with her than with a lot of battle axes I've seen. She sorta warmed a man's eye."

He brayed with laughter at his own idea of humor. Duke Younger was tall and lank, with high, narrow shoulders. His face was long and horsey, with loose lips and a looser chin. His eyes were pale and evasive.

"I still say," drawled Morgan quietly, "that any man who would run off with a helpless girl like that, is about fifty degrees lower than a rattlesnake. I can understand men fighting men, but when they start fighting women, they cease to be men."

It seemed to Bill Morgan that Leek Jaeger's bull neck was just a trifle redder than usual.

Jaeger switched the subject glibly. "I hear you're building up your crew, Bill. If you could use another man, here's one." He jerked his head at Duke Younger. "Duke just hit me for a job, but I told him I was full up. Then you came in, so the idea hit me that you might use him."

"That's right," said Younger. "How about it, Bill? I can't live on my income forever."

Again he brayed with laughter. Bill Morgan managed to curtain the distaste

that he felt for this fellow. "I might use you at that, Duke. I came into town tonight to see Charley Fournier, who had kinda half-promised he'd sign on with me. If he does, I'll be full up. If he doesn't, you can have the job, Duke. Stay here for a while. I'll let you know."

When Bill Morgan left the Yellow Horse, he went down the street, cut across and back to Pete Allen's store. Here he paused for a moment, building a cigarette, his eyes busy up and down the street. Then, with a few quick strides, he had ducked into the alley between the store and the hotel.

"Any luck, Bill?" came Buck Comstock's voice.

"Best in the world," chuckled Morgan. He told swiftly of meeting Jaeger and the other two in the Yellow Horse, and of Younger's request for a job. "Does it make sense to you, Buck?" he ended.

"Plenty!" was the terse reply. "Younger is Jaeger's man. Always has been. Jaeger wants a spy in our camp, Bill. And he's trying this trick to get one. You're hiring Younger, of course?"

"Sure. Just long enough to get him out to the ranch, where I'll jam a gun in his ribs and send him to help Toad Black hold down the spud cellar."

"You do that, Bill. And I'll be out there waiting for you. So Jaeger has brought in Whistler Hahn, eh? The tide is building up, Bill. One of these days the dam is going to bust wide open and there'll be hell and sudden death spread all over this range. Well, you go get Younger, and I'll drift out to the Circle Star. See you later."

Bill Morgan headed again for the Yellow Horse, while Buck slid cautiously back along the alley and out into the open beyond. He crossed to where he had left his bronco. He picked up the reins, threaded them about the animal's neck and reached for the stirrup.

There was the faintest of sounds behind him. Then a hard object was jammed against his spine and a cold voice reached him—Brood Shotwell's voice:

"Too bad, Buck. But reach high! You shouldn't have been fool enough to come this close to town."

CHAPTER VIII

A WOMAN'S CHOICE

THE SURPRISE and swiftness of the attack by Leek Jaeger and Frank Cutts left Jean Harper dazed, almost stupefied. Before she could even think of struggling or putting up a fight, she had been overpowered; tied hand and foot and any outcry she might hope to make had been effectually stifled by the blanket about her head and shoulders.

She lay on the floor, a slim, helpless bundle, trying to gather her wits and hang on to the little thread of courage still in her. What was the meaning of this? What plan had these two treacherous, cowardly brutes?

She could feel the wavering madness of hysteria tugging at her throat. It strained at her lips, and those lips parted. But the scream was never uttered. Somewhere in her being, a whisper of courage reached out and strengthened her jangled senses. That whisper grew until it was a live current. It cooled the fire of dread in her. And she relaxed, the slim lines of her body softening. Muffled though her head was in the blanket, she could hear Jaeger and Cutts talking.

"Go get the horses, Leek," said Cutts. "I'll keep watch here. And if any of those punchers down at the bunkhouse ask questions, pass it off that we're riding to town with the girl. They might not care if they did know the truth, but you never can tell. Some of them might talk. Hurry up."

Jean heard Jaeger departing. A door slammed shut. Momentary silence settled it. Then Cutts stepped close to her. "If you play the game and do as you're told, you won't be hurt," he told her. "But if you get obstreperous, you'll be calmed down in a hurry."

She heard him leave the room. For a moment the wild thought of escape came to her. It left as soon as it came. Those bonds about her wrists and ankles were drawn cruelly tight. Soon Cutts came back, and she could tell that he was anxious and restless, for he paced the floor nervously, back and forth, back and forth. Jean heard a match snap as he lighted a cigarette. Then, even through the

blanket, she could smell the tobacco smoke.

A distant door slammed again and footsteps echoed. Then came Jaeger's voice, exultant: "Couple of heavy poker games going on down at the bunkhouse. Nobody is interested in what we do. I don't believe they even heard me get the horses. Everything set? Come on then. You grab her feet."

Hands settled on Jean's ankles, under her armpits. She was lifted and carried, her body swaying as the two men walked. A current of cool air touched her hands and wrists, and she knew she was out of the house. She heard a horse stamp and snort gustily. She was lowered to the ground. Someone was fumbling at the rope about her ankles.

Then came the voice of Cutts again, smooth and suave, but deadly cold: "You're going to be put on a horse, tied in the saddle. You haven't a chance of getting away. Use an ounce of common sense and you'll be all right."

Her ankles were freed and she was lifted into a saddle. Her ankles were tied once more, this time to the cinch rings. Then the horse beneath her began to move.

Jean had no idea where that long ride took her. There were various turnings and twistings, which, if intended to muddle her so she would have no idea of her destination, were entirely unnecessary.

In time, her wrists and ankles became numb. Her back ached, her shoulders cramped. But courage held her in full and comforting grip now. Defiance lay in her heart. She'd show these two renegades that even a lone, helpless girl could not be bluffed or bulldozed.

The ride came to an end at last. The horses were pulled to a halt.

"I'll go on ahead, Leek," said Cutts. "I can wield the verbal whip better than you can. He may kick over this some, but I pack enough guns to make him knuckle. I'll be back as soon as I can."

Ensued another wait. Somewhere in the far distance a coyote wailed to the stars. The horses shifted and stamped restlessly about and Leek Jaeger quieted them with harsh, tense tones.

In the end, Cutts came back. "Every-

thing is set," he exclaimed exultantly. "And there is just the set-up we want. We'll leave the horses here. Help me get her off."

ANKLES freed once more, Jean was lifted to the ground. Her feet felt dead from stricture; she would have fallen if the two men had not supported her, one on either side. Half-carried, half-dragged, Jean was taken forward.

A low voice hailed out of the darkness, a whining, crusty voice. Cutts answered. Jean's feet stumbled over a threshold. Board floor was under her now. She knew she was beneath a roof again. She was crowded through two more doorways. Then her knees struck the edge of a bunk. She was pushed down upon it.

"Behave yourself and I'll take that blanket off you and free your wrists," said Frank Cutts.

The door was shut. The blanket was lifted away, and in another moment her wrists were free. Jean lay as she was, looking about her. The room was not over ten feet square, barren and empty except for the bunk on which she lay and a couple of old, rawhide-backed chairs. Leek Jaeger stood with his back against the closed door. Frank Cutts stood beside the bunk. He smiled, only with his eyes and without the slightest mirth. Cold purpose and rampant cruelty were in that smile.

"I don't suppose," he drawled, "that you have the least idea where you are, Miss Harper. That is as it should be, of course. I can tell you one thing. Here you'll stay until you decide you're willing to listen to reason."

Jean lifted herself on one elbow. Her dark eyes flayed both of the men with scorn; her red lips curled in contempt. "If by 'reason', you mean listening to you two scoundrels offer to buy or steal my ranch," she said, "then I'll be in this room the rest of my life. What a fine pair of cowardly, lying, underhanded curs you are."

This outburst startled the two men. Plainly, they had thought that they would have only a frightened, cowering girl to deal with, one who would be only too glad to bargain for her freedom. Instead, they quailed under the scorn of a regal, flaming-eyed beauty.

Leek Jaeger would not meet her eyes, but looked here and there, while shifting uneasily about on clumsy feet. Cutts was the first to recover. And for the first time, the cold mask of his face broke in a sudden spasm of anger. Right then Jean Harper knew that of the two, Frank Cutts, immaculate dresser and ex-gambler, was by far the more dangerous of the two.

"Have your say, you little fool," he grated. "We'll let you cool your heels in here for a day or two. If that doesn't bring you to your senses, we'll try sterner methods. All right, Leek, take that lamp."

They backed out of the door, and the portal closed, leaving Jean in utter, stygian blackness. She heard the click of a padlock. Steps moved away. Silence settled in. Then, and only then, did Jean turn downward on the blankets, bury her head in her arms and give way to her feelings.

It must have been half an hour later that she sat up, mopped her eyes dry with the backs of her hands. Those tears had done her a lot of good. Her head seemed clear now. She settled back for a period of thought. There was no use in being stampeded by this set-up.

Reason told her why she had been carried off in this manner. Jaeger and Cutts wanted the Wineglass ranch and seemed ready to go to any lengths to get it. Yet, for the moment, she was safe enough. There was only one thing to do and that was be philosophical about it. Jaeger and Cutts could run their bluff only so far.

She got up and moved about the room, feeling her way. In one of the four walls of her cubicle was a window, with the glass broken from the sash in several places. Exploring fingers told Jean that this window had been solidly boarded up from the outside, though the cracks were wide enough to let in the cool, moist breath of the night. She stood there by the window for a time, letting those currents of sweet air play over her face and throat. In the distance she heard a cow bawl plaintively.

Obviously her prison was a ranchhouse, but just which one it was, or where it might be, Jean had not the slightest idea. She left the window, felt her way to the door and found that it gave not the slight-

est when she threw her weight against it. Escape was out of the question.

JEAN went back to the bunk and stretched out upon it, staring with wide eyes at the invisible ceiling above. Lying there so still, her nostrils picked up a scent reminiscent of a grocery store, of uncooked bacon and onions, of flour and dried fruit. Her prison, evidently, at one time had been a storeroom for provisions.

What chance for rescue did she have? Very little in the immediate present. And strangely enough, at this moment, the figure of Buck Comstock swept into her consciousness. Even there, alone in the dark, the dark tide of warming blood swept her cheeks. Why, along with the thought of possible rescue, had she also thought of Buck Comstock?

It was ridiculous. At this moment Buck Comstock was hiding out, a fugitive from justice. He could do nothing toward a rescue, even if he should learn of her disappearance. And, for that matter, why should he bother to risk himself to free her? They had met only once, talked but a little while. They were, to all practical extents and purposes, still virtual strangers.

A forlorn loneliness descended upon her. It took a real effort to stay the tears. In the end she slept, though restlessly. Once or twice she moaned a trifle, like an infant plagued with dreams.

She awoke to the realization that someone was in the room with her. A vague half-light permeated her prison room. Against the cracks of the boards over the window the bright gold of sunlight lay. Another day had come.

Frank Cutts stood over her. There were dishes on one of the chairs. The rich, heartening aroma of fresh coffee was in the room.

"Your breakfast," said Cutts, as he saw her eyes open. "I'll talk with you while you eat."

She was hungry enough. Her slender body was too vigorous and sturdy not to call for sustenance. She got to her feet, stifled a yawn. Somehow, she was not in the least frightened. It must have been the fact that, outside, the sun was shining.

"I haven't the slightest desire to talk with you, Mr. Cutts," she said quietly.

"I will enjoy my breakfast more if you leave me to myself."

Again the cold mask of Cutts' self-control slid aside. He grabbed her by the arm. "You'll talk—or wish that you had," he gritted. "Once and for all, get it out of your head that I'm just bluffing. I've handled your kind before, and I can do it again."

She pulled away from him, drew up the other chair and began to eat. She ignored Cutts.

But he refused to be ignored. "Get all this," he rasped. "If you know what is good for you, you'll do business with Leek Jaeger and me. We want the Wineglass ranch. We're going to get it, one way or another. You have one chance to get out of this, with money in your pocket and the right to look other people in the eye. I think you know what I mean."

Jean's eyes were devastating as they flamed at him. "You contemptible rat!"

He laughed then, harshly. "Jaeger and I will pay you seven thousand dollars for the Wineglass—our final offer—and not one cent more."

"If you offered seven million, you couldn't have it. And I can tell you this, Mr. Frank Cutts: I haven't been in this range country very long, but there are a few things I've figured out. My disappearance is bound to be noted, sooner or later. Men will search. In the end, they will find me. And no matter what has happened to me, I know what the temper of those men will be. You and your fellow rat, Leek Jaeger, will be hanged!"

Cutts stood very still. Jean did not know it, but her last words had hit Frank Cutts at the weakest part of his armor. Once, years before, Cutts had seen a man lynched. He had never forgotten that picture. It had stayed with him with such maddening constancy that at times he had felt that it was prophetic of his own end. The horror of that thought had become a mania with him.

Jean was too busy with her food to notice the tiny beads of cold sweat which grew on the renegade gambler's forehead, or see how sudden pallor swept over his face. Cutts cursed harshly, whirled and stamped out of the room. The lock clicked behind him.

CHAPTER IX

FUGITIVE'S LESSON IN LAW

IT SEEMED to Buck Comstock, as he felt the double impact of Sheriff Brood Shotwell's voice in his ears and the gun against his spine, that a complete panorama of his life spread itself before his eyes. He saw it all, the hard work, the hardship, the danger. He saw its triumphs and despair, its highlights and drab shadows. He saw what he had been through in this present crisis, the vision of freedom and its meaning to himself and to his friends. And he foresaw what the future would be—behind the walls of Pinole.

Buck dropped the reins, let go of the stirrup. His hands began to lift. "All right, Brood," he said wearily. "You got me."

And then he whirled, leaping. His right hand lashed out and down. It was the most desperate chance he had ever taken in his life. For no intelligent reason, it worked. That clawing right hand smashed full upon Shotwell's gun; locked the spurred hammer back. With the same move, his left forearm blocked out, striking the sheriff across the throat like a bar of iron. And Buck's left foot was driving in and lifting, cutting Shotwell's feet from under him.

Shotwell went down. Buck twisted the gun from his startled grasp. Buck dropped on one knee beside him, the gun reversed and pressing against Shotwell's side.

"Quiet!" Buck murmured. "Sorry, Brood, but I had to pull this. I'm not going to Pinole, Brood. You'll bury me first."

Shotwell gagged and choked a bit from that forearm blow across the throat. When he spoke, his voice was quiet and even: "You're only making things worse for yourself, Buck. You can't keep away from me for ever."

"I'm going to try," said Buck harshly. "Damn it, why did you have to come along now. I got nothing against you personally, Brood. I don't want to hurt you. But if I don't keep you quiet some way, I won't be ten feet from town before you'll have the alarm out. And I can't

afford to be chased tonight. I got business to do."

"That," said Shotwell, with a thin, mirthless chuckle, "is your problem to figure out, Buck."

Buck scowled down at the sheriff. And then, in his dilemma, came a thought that brought him crouching even lower and put a vibrant eagerness into his voice.

"Brood, when you were out at the Circle Star tonight, talking with Bill Morgan, I was in the next room, listening. No; Bill didn't know I was there. I'd sneaked in by a window. But I heard what you said. There's been several times, Brood—particularly in the past month or two when I doubted your makeup. But by what you said to Bill Morgan out at the ranch tonight, I've decided different. I think, Brood, you're square, deep down. I'm going to gamble that way. I want you to ride out to the Circle Star with me now. There's going to be something out there worth listening to—and I want a bona-fide witness to hear it. After you've heard that, I'm going to leave it up to you, what you do with me. If you still want to bring me in, then I'll come quiet, and you can lock me up and send me to Pinole. I give you my word on that, Brood."

For a long moment Shotwell was silent. "That," he said slowly, "don't make sense. But your word is good with me, Buck. I'll go you."

Buck caught him by the shoulder, lifted him to his feet. "Here's your gun, Brood," he said simply. "Go get a bronc. I'll meet you on the trail."

Slowly Shotwell holstered his weapon. He was staring queerly at Buck through the darkness. He nodded. "I'll meet you," he said.

THEY rode swiftly across Timber Valley, across the sage tableland beyond and finally down into Coyote Valley to the Circle Star headquarters.

Bones Baker answered Buck's knock. He stared in wordless amazement as Buck and Shotwell walked into the ranch-house. He saw that both Shotwell and Buck wore guns. Here were sheriff and fugitive, yet they came in side by side in apparent friendliness.

Buck grinned at the look on Bones'

face. "Whistle," he said, "before you explode, Bones. Big doings tonight. You still got Toad Black in safe keeping?"

"Yuh—yup," stuttered Bones. "I—I got him."

"Toad Black!" Shotwell whirled and stared at Buck.

Buck laughed. "That's right, Brood. He's here. I'll produce him in a minute. He's one of the two who is going to speak some of the words I brought you out here to listen to. Think hard, Brood, and you'll begin to get the drift."

Shotwell thought hard, grunted, and said nothing.

Buck went to the outer door, listened a moment, then nodded. "Bill and Duke Younger will be here in a minute. I can hear their bronses. Brood, you go in that room and shut the door. And listen. I don't want Black and Younger to know you're around."

Shotwell, frowning and thoughtful, went into the other room and shut the door.

Two minutes later Duke Younger stepped into the ranchhouse. There was a wild, scared look about him. He had his hands in the air, his gun was gone, and Bill Morgan was herding him unceremoniously along. At sight of Buck, Duke Younger seemed to wilt.

Bill Morgan kicked out a chair with a stern command. "Sit there! And not a move, Younger! Else it will be your hard luck."

Younger sat down and clasped sweating hands on his knees. Buck took off his guns and handed them to the still bewildered Bones Baker.

"Hold these, Bones. Shut and lock that outer door—and bring Toad Black in here."

At the mention of Toad Black, Younger caught his breath in a distinct gasp. A moment later Toad Black shuffled in, looking more uncouth and animal-like than the last time Buck had seen him. Black's eyes went straight to Buck, and a plain glint of fear showed in them.

"Fair enough," drawled Buck. "Bill, you and Bones just listen and look on. Don't interfere. I'll handle this thing . . . Black!" His voice took on the crackle of ice. "You ready to open up and do some talking?"

Toad Black licked his lips. "Talkin'?"

the renegade blurted. "What kind of talkin'? I don't know what you mean."

"Yes, you do. I want the truth about that verdict of guilty that the jury brought in against me. Who fixed that jury?"

Black looked startled, then sulkily stubborn. He shook his head. "I don't know nothin'."

Smack!

The sound of Buck's right hand, palm flat and open as it struck Black's face, was like a small report. Black staggered back, feeling of his face, an involuntary curse breaking from his lips. Buck followed him, stood with his feet spread, shoulders loose and ready, fists tightening into knots of rawhide.

"You know plenty," Buck lashed. "You know that somebody fixed that jury, gave them instructions to vote me guilty, no matter what the evidence. And you're going to tell us all about it—now! Else the beating I gave you last time will be a picnic to what I'll hand you now. Better believe I mean business, Black. My liberty and my life are at stake. If you think I'm not going to fight for them, you are crazy. I'll beat you down. I'll butcher you with my bare fists—but, by God, you're going to talk!"

Buck Comstock seemed to have gained in stature as he spoke. The set-leanness of his face was so marked that it was ridged, almost sharp of angle. His gray eyes held the raw, cold spark of newly cut steel. An air of savage mercilessness settled over him.

Toad Black's bulging, frog-like eyes moved over Buck, pausing but a breath on Buck's face. He spoke to Bill Morgan. "I'm your prisoner here," he blurted. "You going to stand for this?"

Bill Morgan shrugged. "Buck is playing this hand. And I'm backing him."

Toad Black licked his heavy lips, lips still puffed and bruised from his last set-to with Buck Comstock. A sudden, stubborn, hot rage flared up in him. "I'll see you in hell before I say a word!" he snarled.

BUCK weaved in. Toad Black threw his left arm up in a gesture of defense and clubbed his right at Buck's face. Buck went in under the blow and slashed a savage fist to Black's body. That punch wrung a gasp of agony from Black. And it seemed to touch off, in one wild explosion, a charge of damned-up dynamite in Buck.

He swarmed all over his man, rocking his bullet head back and forth with ripping, merciless fists, switching his attack to Black's body as the renegade's hands went up to shield his battered face, then battering back at Black's face as the body punishment dragged Black's guard down.

Black had tried a few wild blows, none of which seemed to have the slightest effect on the savage man before him. Now he seemed intent only on shielding himself from that merciless barrage of punches, which rocked him and tore him and beat the blood from him.

Bill Morgan and Bones Baker watched the conflict with cold, measuring eyes. Duke Younger watched it also, but his face grew more pallid and sweating with every blow, and his loose mouth shook and slavered in fright.

Abruptly, Toad Black gave up backing away, and charged in—a bull of a man gone berserk. But, instead of swinging his fists, he set himself and kicked out and upward, driving a booted foot at Buck Comstock. That kick would have crippled Buck and dropped him cold had it landed squarely. But Buck twisted to one side and took the impact on the thigh of his left leg.

Even so, he nearly went down, for the blow whirled him completely around and drove him the width of the room. He came up with a crash against the wall. Black, blubbering an animal-like cry, charged after him.

Buck's left leg was almost paralyzed. He staggered out of the line of Black's rush, set himself on his sound leg and smashed Black a blow to the face which rocked him on his heels. Then Buck became a madman. Half-hopping, half-dragging his left leg, he went after Black like a fury. His punches became faster, the *thock* of his fist louder.

Black began to wobble and stagger. He gave back and back until a wall stayed any further retreat. And there Buck cut him down in an avalanche of blows. Toad Black's knees buckled. He slid toward the floor. On his knees, he wavered for a moment. Then he fell, face downward, gasping and twitching.

Buck turned. His bitter, savage eyes fell on Duke Younger. "You're next," he panted. "I'm not through with that stubborn hog. Soon as he can stand on his feet,

I take up where I left off with him. Between now and then, I work on you, Younger. Get on your feet, you crooked rat!"

But Duke Younger did not stand. He cowered down in his chair, licking his trembling lips. Buck started across the room toward him, steady on his feet now that the paralysis was leaving his left leg.

There was something utterly certain, utterly remorseless in that advance of Buck Comstock. It was like the steady onward sweep of a storm cloud, filled with white lightning.

Duke Younger's nerve collapsed. "No!" he gasped. "No! Don't hit me. Don't hit me. I'll talk. That jury was fixed. Every man on it got a hundred dollars, cold cash. I got it. Black got it. We all got it. The jury was fixed, I tell you."

Bill Morgan gave vent to a long sigh, as though a vast relief had come over him. He whirled on Duke Younger, fixed him with a cold, penetrating eye.

"Who fixed that jury?" he demanded. "Who gave you that hundred dollars?"

Younger looked around like a trapped animal. He gulped, licked his lips and hesitated.

Buck Comstock slithered forward, with his flinty fists loose and swinging, his eyes glittering and implacable. "Better talk, Younger," he gritted. "You'll not be given another chance."

Duke Younger caved. "Jaeger," he gulped hoarsely. "Jaeger and Cutts. They bought that jury. They passed out the money. They told us to vote guilty—no matter what the evidence!"

Buck drew a long breath and turned. Toad Black was up on one elbow, glaring at Younger. Buck stepped over to him.

"That right, Black?" he asked, his voice silky soft with menace. "Is Younger telling the truth?"

Toad Black stared up at Buck through eyes filmed and smeared from the punishment he had undergone. Now that old fear came into them. It was as though he knew that Buck Comstock would always stand over him like this; that no matter what he did, Buck Comstock would always beat him down, drive him to the floor, a sodden, quivering hulk.

He nodded. "Younger's right."

Buck went swiftly to the inner door, flung it wide. "All right, Brood," he called. "Come on in."

THERE was a strange look on Brood Shotwell's face as he stepped into the light. A vast, burning contempt flamed in his eyes as he glanced at Toad Black and Duke Younger. His glance went on to Buck. He put out his hand.

"Shake, Buck," he said curtly. "I'm sorry I been part and parcel to such a rotten deal. From the first, I've suspected something along this line, but I had no way of proving it, nor did I imagine it was as raw as it proves to be. Whether you choose to believe it or not, my intentions had been that after you were safely in Pinole, I was going to do a lot of investigating on my own to bring out proof of the crookedness my better sense told me was in that trial. But I had to make a show of going through with my official duty. I might also add that the night you made a getaway—and tonight, in town—I could have been a little faster in all ways, if I had tried real hard." A slow, grim smile came over his face.

Buck understood. "I'm apologizing for all the hard thoughts, Brood," he said simply.

"That goes for me, too," murmured Bill Morgan.

"An' here," chirruped Bones Baker.

Brood Shotwell's smile broadened, but was wiped swiftly away as he looked once more at Younger and Toad Black. "Can I have these two rats, Buck?"

"They're all yours, Brood," Buck nodded. "I'm done with 'em. I got what I wanted out of them. What do you intend doing with them?"

"First, they go to town and face Judge Henning. They'll tell him exactly what they told us tonight. After that, I'm liable to take a quirt and cut my initials in 'em."

Buck frowned slightly. "Remember what Jaeger told you, Brood, the night I made a break for it? I don't want you to jeopardize your job. And with election three months away—"

Sheriff Brood Shotwell made a short, fierce gesture. "I've been sheriff in this neck of the woods a long time, Buck. I like the job; I'd like to keep it. But if keeping it means I've got to sell out on square-shooting and honesty, I don't want the office.

While I wear this star it's going to be kept free from tarnish. If, three months from now, the Twin Buttes range decides they want a different sheriff, let it be that way. I'll still have some self-respect. And I reckon, in this life, that's the main thing. All right! Black! Younger! Get on your feet. We're traveling."

"Miss Harper?" Buck asked. "Have you found any line on her yet?"

"Not yet. I admit that thing has got me fighting my head. I don't know just what to think," Shotwell admitted.

"She must be somewhere," Buck said gravely. "She couldn't have just vanished into thin air. Why not try searching every ranchhouse on the Twin Buttes range, Brood?"

Shotwell gave Buck a long and searching look. "That," he admitted slowly, "is an idea with possibilities. I was dumb not to think of it before. Tomorrow I'll have to act on that suggestion."

"One more thing," said Buck. "I can circulate as free as I please now?"

"For all my office will have to say about it," said Shotwell quietly, "you can come and go as you please, Buck. Technically, the law would have to clear you first, by due process. We'll forget that, this time. Adios, gentlemen. You—Black and Younger—march!"

Chapter X

TREACHEROUS LEAD

JUDGE HENNING, awakened from a sound sleep, was irascible and nervous when he opened his door and was confronted by Sheriff Brood Shotwell and his two cowed and sullen prisoners.

At sight of the three men, the judge's eyes popped wide, and then filmed with a queer, almost frightened wariness. Brood Shotwell, watching him closely, did not miss that last expression.

"Sorry to root you out this time of night, Judge," said Shotwell. "But these two buzzards got something to say that I want you to hear."

"This is no time to bother me with anything of the sort," snapped the judge testily. "I'm weary. I need my sleep. You can bring them around tomorrow, Sheriff."

"I've brought them tonight," growled Shotwell. "And you're going to listen to them. You can," he added sarcastically, "sleep late in the morning."

The judge tried to meet the boring impact of Shotwell's glance, but failed. His eyes dropped and he stepped aside. "Very well! Very well!" he exclaimed crustily. "If you insist. But see that it is kept down to essentials. I'm in no mood for lengthy conversation."

Shotwell herded his prisoners in and closed the door. "All right, Younger, speak your piece. If you think you can clam up because Buck Comstock isn't here to work on you, forget it. I'll take on where Buck left off and do equally as good a job."

Judge Henning started. "Did you mention Comstock—Buck Comstock? Where is he? Have you found him?"

"We'll come to that later, Judge," said Shotwell drily. "Speak up, Younger."

Younger shifted his feet nervously, stared at the floor. "W-well, Judge—Leek Jaeger and Frank Cutts paid me and Black and the other ten of the jury one hundred simoleons apiece to turn in a guilty verdict against Comstock. But, Judge," and here a frantic, pleading note came into his voice, "us boys didn't realize—"

"Shut up!" rasped Shotwell. "Well, Judge, did you get that? Did you hear him say that Jaeger and Cutts bought that jury for twelve hundred dollars—so that Buck Comstock would be convicted and railroaded to Pinole? Now what you got to say?"

The judge had gone pallid. Sweat was starting on his forehead and his eyes blinked wildly. "W-why, bless—gracious me!" he stammered. "I—I don't know what to say."

"While you're getting your breath," snapped Shotwell with definite contempt, "listen to Black. All right, Black! Is Younger telling the truth?"

Toad Black, smart enough to know that he was definitely hooked, and viciously intent on dragging everyone else he could into the mess, leered savagely as he nodded.

"Sure, he's tellin' the truth. But that ain't news to that bleary-eyed old crane of a judge. He knew that trial was fixed, all the time. He knew the jury was bought. And I been wonderin' how much Jaeger

and Cutts paid him to slap twenty-five years on Comstock. Me, I took the money they offered. But it wasn't necessary. I've always hated Buck Comstock's guts. I'd have voted him guilty, anyhow. But don't let that old skunk fool you, Shotwell. He's in this as deep as anyone else. Look at him and you can see I'm right."

"That's a lie," shrilled the judge. "Why, that leering scoundrel, I'll have him up for contempt! I'll sentence him to Pinole for the rest of his natural life. Why—"

"Save your breath, Judge," advised Shotwell curtly. "You're all through sentencing anybody to anywhere."

Judge Henning sank into a chair, his head in his hands. Confession of his perfidy and knowledge of its enormous effect was written all over him. Sheriff Brood Shotwell's eyes were very, very bleak. He turned to Younger and Black.

"You two," he growled, "are traveling. I don't care where, long as it is far enough away. To hold you and prosecute you for perjury would cost too much time and money. So I'm giving you a floater. But get this right! If I ever see either of you within a hundred miles of Twin Buttes, after you walk out that door, I won't arrest you. I'll . . ." His hands slid to his gun suggestively. "Git!" He barked flatly.

Younger and Black, startled at their release, knowing that Shotwell meant exactly what he said, disappeared in the night.

The sheriff shut the door and turned back to Judge Henning. "Well, Judge," he said coldly, "I guess it's your turn to talk. And I reckon you better talk plenty."

THE judge did not look up. He sat there with his head in his hands, hunched shoulders shaking as though with palsy.

"They had me under their thumb," he quavered. "I had to do it—or they would have made a pauper of me. Every cent I had in the world is tied up . . ."

"Tied up where?" snapped Brood Shotwell.

The judge shook his head. He seemed almost on the verge of a stroke. He was shuddering and giving vent to gasping, whimpering moans. The man was far gone in the depths of utter cowardice and despair. Brood Shotwell's eyes glittered with contempt.

"Before morning, you'll prepare written authority declaring that past farce was no trial," he growled. "You'll dismiss the charges against Buck Comstock and you'll give the reasons why. I'll be in to see you tomorrow morning. And I want those papers ready and in order. I'll admit there are a lot of shorthorns in this neck of the woods, but there are a lot of mighty good and square men here also. If I should let out all the truth about that trial, it might go plenty hard for you, Henning. I'm not calling you 'judge.' You're not worthy of the name."

At this moment a dark, low-crouched figure stole away from the side of the judge's house, circled a cautious way down to the center of town and finally slipped into the Yellow Horse Saloon.

When, a minute later, Brood Shotwell stepped out into the night, all was still, except for his horse, which stood, patiently ground-reined, rolling its bit ring now and then. The sheriff took up the reins and walked downtown, leading the horse behind him, heading for the livery barn at the far end of the street.

A great weariness, a vast disillusionment lay over Brood Shotwell. In all the years he had been in office, where he had seen the mean, leering, naked souls of wayward men paraded many, many times, he had never come across such a befouling condition as now faced him. The dignity of the law had always meant much to Brood Shotwell. The manner in which it had been defiled in this case made him almost physically sick.

He put up his horse and went to his room. For a long time he was unable to sleep. In the end, weary nature took its toll. Hours later, not long before dawn, a faint, muffled report echoed dimly through the chill hours. The sound did not awaken Shotwell, though it disturbed him enough to make him turn over and sigh deeply, before sinking back into heavy sleep. A dog barked fitfully, but even that did not rouse the weary sheriff.

Sheriff Brood Shotwell was up and about again at sunrise. He was grim of face and eye. His nod was curt to the greetings of several townspeople he met on the street. He saw the Widow Jenkins, who eked out a meager living for herself and her three children by doing odd jobs of housework

about the town, hurrying on her way to Judge Henning's cottage, where, three times a week, she cleaned and scrubbed.

Shotwell thought of Judge Henning as he had last seen him, the night before—a hunched, palsied wretch, stammering out the admission that he had defamed his high office. That picture had been with Shotwell all night long, and it was not a pretty one.

Spike St. Ives, Shotwell's deputy, came across the street. "What's the job today?" he asked.

"The girl, of course," growled Shotwell. "We got to find that girl."

"Comstock," said St. Ives meaningly, "will be getting plumb away if we don't do somethin' about him."

"No matter." Shotwell shrugged. "Right now the important thing is to locate Jean Harper. As far as Comstock is concerned—"

He broke off sharply, for, echoing down the street came the shrill, high scream of a terrified woman. Whirling toward the sound, Shotwell and St. Ives saw the Widow Jenkins rushing out into the middle of the upper end of the street, tossing her arms and shambling about hysterically.

Shotwell and his deputy raced for the spot. The street behind them filled swiftly with an excited crowd. By the time Shotwell reached the Widow Jenkins, she was on her knees in the dusty street, her apron thrown over her head while she rocked back and forth, moaning. Shotwell caught her by the arms, dragged her to her feet and shook her.

"What's wrong, ma'am?" he rasped. "What scared you?"

Her eyes were rolling, her chin sagging. "The judge!" she quavered. "Judge Henning—blood . . ."

SHOTWELL whirled to St. Ives. "Take care of her." Then he darted across to the judge's cottage and leaped through the open door. He stopped, dead still.

In one corner of the room was a small desk and chair. In a crumpled heap beside the chair lay Judge Henning. A dark pool of blood had formed under his prone head. It took but a moment to find out two things. The judge was stone dead—and had been for hours. He had been shot through the head.

Scattered papers, all of them blank, lay on the floor. A bottle of ink had overturned on the desk and spread its crooked, black stain. Some of the ink had run down the slant of the desk top and dripped onto the floor.

Sheriff Shotwell turned slowly to the door, where men were crowding through. "Get out, boys," he rasped harshly. "This is a job for the coroner. Somebody has shot Judge Henning. Send the word to Doc Pollard."

Two hours later Shotwell and St. Ives mounted horses in front of the livery barn and rode out of Twin Buttes. They rode alone, taking no posse with them. Two miles from town they met up with Leek Jaeger, Frank Cutts and Whistler Hahn, heading for town at more than a leisurely pace. The three men pulled their mounts to a rearing halt in the middle of the trail.

"What's this about Judge Henning being shot?" demanded Jaeger. "Any truth to it?"

Shotwell nodded. "He's dead. Somebody killed him late last night. Doc Pollard said he'd been dead for hours when the Widow Jenkins, who did housework for the judge, found the body this morning."

"But who in hell would have wanted to plug Judge Henning?" blurted out Jaeger.

"I'm trying to figure that out myself," said Shotwell quietly. "At present, all I know is that somebody did."

"More than one criminal the judge has sentenced, has had it in for him," said Frank Cutts coldly.

Leek Jaeger jerked around in his saddle. "By hell!" he exclaimed. "I'll bet that's the answer."

"What is?" rasped Shotwell.

"Comstock—Buck Comstock. He'd be feeling that way toward Judge Henning. I tell you, Shotwell, you better—"

Shotwell cut him short with a curt laugh. "Suppose we lay off that kind of talk, Jaeger, until we know. You seem to me to be a little too ready in your accusations against Buck Comstock. You've made talk Comstock was the one who ran off with Jean Harper. Now you got him murdering Judge Henning. And you backed the charge of him murdering Ben Sloan. Better go slow, or some of those accusations will have

a kick-back, and a damn hard one at that."

Quick anger twisted the face of Leek Jaeger. "Do I have to remind you again, Shotwell, that election is only three months off?"

"No!" snapped Shotwell harshly. "You don't. But I'm telling you this much. No matter what happens at that election, for the next three months I'm going to be sheriff—all the way."

Jaeger would have made another retort, but Frank Cutts threw up his hand. "Shut up, Leek. You had that call-down coming. Shotwell's doing all right. You got any line on Comstock, Brood?"

"I might have," said the sheriff, looking Cutts hard in the eye. "I may locate him today. You'll hear about it if I do. Come on, Spike. We got work to do."

BROOD SHOTWELL rode south for the entire length of Timber Valley, with Spike St. Ives jogging silently along at his elbow. Shotwell was grimly thoughtful. St. Ives rode with his lank figure in a crouching slouch, his narrow face inscrutable and expressionless. Not for several miles did St. Ives speak. Then he stirred restlessly.

"Just where the hell are we headin', Brood?" he asked.

"I want to check up on something concerning the disappearance of Jean Harper," answered Shotwell. "Something is rotten around this range, Spike. Something smells to high heaven. And I think the answer to the whole mess will come when we locate Jean Harper and have a chance to talk with her. So . . . I'm going to run down a little idea this morning."

St. Ives shrugged, said nothing more and built a cigarette.

Now Shotwell reined to the east. They left Timber Valley and crossed the barren sageland beyond, to come down into the southernmost reaches of Coyote Valley. Out there, dead ahead, stood the headquarters of the Stirrup Cross. Spike St. Ives stirred in his saddle again.

"Hell! You don't think Old Man Addis knows anything about the disappearance of the girl, do you?"

Shotwell shrugged. "All I'm thinking is that I ain't been figuring deep enough or in the right line. But I'm starting to now."

They came down in front of the Stirrup

Cross ranchhouse, and Old Man Addis came out to meet them. Addis looked seedy, worried. His manner and voice were querulous.

"What brings you down here this morning, Shotwell?" he demanded. In the words and the tone was a vast uneasiness.

Brood Shotwell's eyes narrowed as he dismounted. "I'm looking for Jean Harper, Addis," he said. "I got to thinking that she might be hid out in one of the ranch-houses somewhere on the Twin Buttes range. So I'm going to search 'em all. I'm starting with this ranchhouse."

Addis went white as a sheet. He began to shake. "I—I didn't want them to bring her here," he quavered. "I told them not to. But damn 'em, they did! I'm not party to this thing, Shotwell. I couldn't help myself. I knew this would happen."

He began wringing his hands in a manner which reminded Shotwell of how Judge Henning had caved. How far did this cesspool of deceit and corruption reach? Who next would he find to be another tool of greed and fear? Shotwell wondered.

"We've found the answer to one of our problems, Spike," he said over his shoulder. "Come on. Get out of your saddle and help me search this ranchhouse."

Instead of obeying, Spike St. Ives whipped out a gun. Coldly, he leveled it—at Sheriff Brood Shotwell—and pulled the trigger. Shotwell staggered, coughed and went down.

Even as the sheriff struck the ground, a rifle snarled wickedly from the head of the low slope above the ranchhouse. Brood Shotwell, his senses blurred and fading, managed by terrific effort to pull himself up on one elbow. Through the darkness which was closing in across his eyes, he could dimly see a compact group of riders, lashing down the slope. And he could hear the mutter of speeding hoofs.

Chapter XI

WHEN VIGILANTES RIDE

WHEN Sheriff Brood Shotwell rode away toward Twin Buttes with Duke Younger and Toad Black, Buck Comstock closed the door of the Circle Star ranchhouse and turned to Bill Morgan and

Bones Baker, with a grim smile on his lips. He began rubbing his thigh where Toad Black's treacherous kick had landed.

"Well," he drawled, "it worked. I knew that one of those two would cave. Younger always was a yellow dog. And when he spilled it, Black saw there was no use playing the clam . . . Bill, I'm a free man. Do you realize what that means?"

"I realize plenty, kid," said Bill heartily. "Shake! Bones, you generally have a bottle hid out. Go get it. We're going to celebrate this with a drink."

"I'll bring two bottles," vowed Bones enthusiastically. "Me, I feel like goin' on a binge. Buck, I'm shore tickled pink over this. Sit down an' rest that laig of yours where Black kicked you. Doggone his crooked soul, I wish I'd batted him a little harder with my fryin' pan the other day."

Bones got his bottle and they had their drink of celebration. "Getting Brood off your trail doesn't mean you're plumb clear of trouble, Buck," said Morgan. "Jaeger and Cutts will be after your scalp. Don't forget that."

"And I'll be after theirs," Buck answered quietly. "The picture grows clearer and clearer all the time, Bill. We got those skunks in the open now. And we know for certain what they're after. I'd bet a leg that they're behind the disappearance of Jean Harper."

"Shouldn't wonder," agreed Morgan. "They seem to be in back of every other piece of dirty work. I'd give a lot to know what became of that girl."

Buck's jaw stole out. "The first thing I intend to do is to run that trail down. For all we know, she may be hid out somewhere in the J Bar C ranchhouse, or in some other ranch on this range. She's around here somewhere. I feel it, somehow."

"Common sense narrows the whole thing down pretty well," observed Bill Morgan drily. "We know she's not in this house. And we know she wouldn't be at the Rafter T or Lazy F. Bud Tharp and Johnny Frazier don't shape up that way, Buck."

"Hell!" growled Buck. "I know that. But I'm going to have a good look at the Wineglass again, and they might even have brass enough to hold her down in my cabin. Anyway, I'm shore going to look around."

"Howcome yuh didn't mention the Stirrup Cross?" put in Bones Baker. "There's a ranchhouse down there, yuh know. Or don't yuh figure Old Man Addis would—"

Buck snorted contemptuously. "Old Man Addis is a cantankerous old pelican, but he wouldn't—"

Bill Morgan jumped to his feet, took a quick turn up and down the room. "Wait a minute! Wait a minute," he rumbled. "That reminds me. Buck, you remember the night I met you out at Indian Spring? Well, I was pretty careful not to lay a straight trail out there, so I left here in the middle of the afternoon and rode kind of here and there and yonder to mix up my sign. About sundown I poked into the Stirrup Cross. Jaeger and Cutts were there, talking to Tom Addis. None of the three of them seemed overjoyed at sight of me, and Jaeger and I got in a little word fuss over you. Funny part of it was, Addis sided with those other two polecats. At the time, it struck me as powerful funny, but afterwards I forgot it. But now," he added meaningly, stopping his pacing and staring at Buck shrewdly, "if you're going to search ranchhouses, I wouldn't overlook the Stirrup Cross."

Buck's eyes gleamed. "Keno! We'll have a little look through the Stirrup Cross. And then we'll tackle the J Bar C."

Morgan nodded slowly. "That last listens like quite a chore, Buck. It'll take more than a couple of men to put that over."

"I reckon maybe Bud Tharp and Johnny Frazier might be interested," said Buck. "That will make four of us."

"We'll take along some of the crews, too," said Morgan. "A dozen of us won't look too many when we hit the J Bar C. You get a good night's sleep in a real bunk tonight. We'll get under way first thing tomorrow morning."

THE following morning, with Bill Morgan and two of the Circle Star crew, Buck rode south to the Rafter T, where they put their plan before Bud Tharp. Bud, short and broad, was explosively happy over Buck's exoneration by Brood Shotwell.

"Brood is square," he said. "Most likely, he's beginning to see through a lot of crooked stuff. Shore, I'll go along with you

boys. And I'll throw a couple more punchers into the gang."

At the Lazy F they met with a similar welcome. Johnny Frazier, tall and keen-eyed, with a soft, lazy drawl, showed enthusiasm for the scheme. "Even," he said, "if we don't draw a lick of luck, it'll be a lot of satisfaction in showing Jaeger and Cutts that we got suspicions which we ain't afraid to back up. Me, I'm going to enjoy this."

When they left the Lazy F they mustered ten men. Buck, leading the pack, set a steady pace for the Stirrup Cross. Just short of the crest of the low slope above the ranchhouse, Buck went on alone to look over the scene.

Immediately he saw and identified Brood Shotwell and Spike St. Ives, riding down on the ranch headquarters from the west. Neither Shotwell or St. Ives saw Buck, apparently being intent on the ranch buildings. Buck turned and waved the rest of his party up.

"I guess Brood is out to do a little searching on his own, Bill," he said. "Remember, I suggested it to him last night."

"Yeah," grunted Morgan. "Looks like we had our ride down here for nothing. Brood can take care of this joint, all right."

"Wait a minute," advised Buck. "I'm interested enough in this to find out what Brood learns."

They saw Shotwell and St. Ives draw up at the ranchhouse and Tom Addis come out to talk with them. They saw Brood Shotwell dismount, say something more to Addis, then speak to St. Ives over his shoulder. And then they saw the treacherous deputy drag a gun and shoot Brood Shotwell down.

Bud Tharp, who had been carrying his Winchester across the saddle in front of him, reacted with automatic and bewildering speed. Even before the first cough of report had died from St. Ives' gun, Bud had tossed up his rifle and it spat a thin challenge . . . St. Ives went down like a pole-axed calf.

"The damned, rotten dog!" Bud cried. "He shot Brood in the back!"

The next second the entire group of riders was spurring down the slope. Buck, his heart cold with dread and fury, rode in the van, with his eyes fixed on Brood

Shotwell. He saw the sheriff pull himself up on one elbow, then collapse again. A moment later Buck was out of the saddle and on his knees beside the sheriff.

Shotwell was unconscious now, but not dead. He was wickedly wounded. The bullet from St. Ives' gun, striking him just below and to the back of the right shoulder, had ranged downward.

Johnny Frazier, helping Buck, swore softly and shook his head as he saw the wound. "Looks bad," he growled. "Damn bad! Brood ain't as young as he used to be."

"We got to do all we can," gritted Buck. "That damned, treacherous rat of a St. Ives, to shoot a man like Brood Shotwell in the back—a man who had worked with him, paid him wages, trusted him! Did Bud make a center shot on St. Ives?"

"Plenty, I'd say," nodded Frazier. "Bud saved us the chore of swingin' him. He's dead."

Bill Morgan pushed Buck aside, dropping on his knees beside the wounded sheriff. "I'll take care of Brood," he rumbled. "You talk to Addis, Buck. He's got something interesting to tell you."

Buck, a little bewildered, found Bud Tharp holding a gun on Addis, who seemed to be having a fit of ague. A few yards away, three riders who worked for Addis were being faced by the rest of Buck's party.

"We came to the right place, Buck," growled Bud Tharp. "Addis has got that Harper girl locked up in the house. He's trying hard to say somethin', but he's so shaky it don't make much sense."

Buck caught Addis by the shoulder, shook him. "Get hold of yourself, Addis," he rasped. "What's this about Miss Harper?"

Addis jerked a thumb toward the house. "She—she's in there," he stammered. "Jaeger and Cutts brought her here. Put—put her in my storeroom. M-made me do it, damn their black souls! They been ironing me down and down—and now. . ."

Addis began to shake again and his tight chin grew so loose and wobbly his words became an unintelligible mutter.

"Keep a gun on him, Bud," snapped Buck. "When he quits shakin', we may learn something."

BUCK ran to the house and went in. More than once he had been in the Stirrup Cross ranchhouse, and he knew where the storeroom was. He stopped before the door of it, noted the heavy hasp and padlock. A cold, white rage went over Buck. Somehow, the thought of that slim, black-haired girl, held like some criminal behind that padlock, reached far down in him and stirred to life a fury and resentment the like of which he had never known before. Jaeger and Cutts had done this.

He knocked on the door and called out. "Miss Harper—Miss Harper! This is Buck Comstock."

He heard her muffled cry of surprise. Then she was beating with her little fists on the inner side of the door.

"Buck—Buck Comstock!" came that muffled voice. "Thank God! Please, Buck! Please get me out of here."

Buck ran into the kitchen and found a heavy, iron poker. Back at the storeroom door, he set to work. He jammed the end of the poker under the hasp and began to pry. The set of that hasp was stout and stubborn, but Buck was full of angry, furious strength. He drove the poker to a better purchase, and strained against it with all his strength. There sounded the slow, squealing pull of staple and bolt. The hasp clanged loose and free. Buck pushed the door open.

Jean Harper stood there for a moment, looking at him, her eyes wide and swimming. She was twisting her slim hands. Her soft lower lip began to tremble. "Buck!" she whispered. "Buck, I knew—you'd come for me."

Then she ran to him and, somehow, she was in his arms. She clung to him, sobbing convulsively. Buck stood very tall and still, holding her as he might a terrified child, saying no word, patting her shoulder to comfort her.

As abruptly as she had given away, she quieted. She pulled away from him, dabbing at her eyes. "I—I'm sorry," she whispered. "I did not mean to go to pieces. But the relief—to know that a friend, to know that I would be out of there. . . ." She choked up again.

"I savvy," drawled Buck gently. "You're a mighty brave little lady. And you're safe

now. Later, when you're feeling better, you can tell me—"

"I can tell you now, Buck Comstock." She spoke swiftly, intensely. She told him how Jaeger and Cutts had overpowered her at the J Bar C ranchhouse, how they had brought her down here and locked her up. She told of the several times they had come and bulldozed and threatened her, of how Cutts had been particularly offensive in his threats. "And all because they were determined to get control of my ranch," she ended. "But I told that beast of a Cutts that, no matter what they did, I'd never sign that property over to them."

"Good girl!" commended Buck. "And Addis—did he bother you?"

"No. In a way, he was kind enough. He brought my meals to me. He always seemed so frightened, so nervous. But he was kind enough."

"Good!" said Buck. "You wait right here. I'll be back for you in a minute. I'm taking you to Bill Morgan's ranch, where you'll be perfectly safe."

Outside, Buck saw that a blanket litter was being swung between two horses, evidently to carry Brood Shotwell. Bud Tharp still held a gun on Old Man Addis.

"The girl all right, Buck?" asked Bud. "On your answer depends whether this damned old coyote goes on livin'."

"You can put up your gun, Bud. Miss Harper is all right." Buck turned cold-eyes on Tom Addis. "How long you been in cahoots with Jaeger and Cutts?"

"I'm not in cahoots with them," cried Addis. "They made me keep that poor girl prisoner. They made me, I tell you." Addis had steadied a lot by this time.

"That," said Buck sharply, "sounds like so much talk, Addis. How could they make you do a thing of that sort?"

"This ranch . . ." Addis waved an encircling hand. "It's all I have. The best part of my life went into building up this ranch. Jaeger and Cutts threatened to drive me to the wall, to take it away from me. And they could do it, too. They have the men—the power. What could I do? My partner and me—"

"Your what?" cut in Buck. "Since when did you have a partner?"

"For years. No one knew of it besides Judge Henning and myself. How Jaeger

and Cutts found it out, I still don't know. But they did."

"Where does Judge Henning come into the picture?"

"Judge Henning is my partner. All he and I own in the world is tied up in this ranch. We're old men, too old to fight a combine like Jaeger and Cutts. What could we do under the threat of their power?"

"Judge Henning!" breathed Buck. "So Judge Henning is your partner! That makes the picture complete. I see it now. I see it all."

ONE of Bill Morgan's riders came over to them. "The three Stirrup Cross punchers want to talk to you, Buck."

Buck nodded and followed the rider over to the three men. Buck knew these boys—Andy Devine, Sig Loftus and Dave Burke.

Andy Devine spoke. "Buck, I want you to believe us when we say we had no idea that girl was locked up in the old man's storeroom. If we had of, we shore as hell would have tore the roof off. We knew somethin' was on the mind of Addis, for he was worried and scared and crochety. We figgered he'd gotten into some kind of a business deal with Jaeger and Cutts and was gettin' the worst of it. But that was none of our business. We were hired to punch cows, not iron out his business troubles. But we didn't know about the girl. That's gospel, Buck."

Buck nodded gravely. "I believe you, Andy. We're holding nothing against you three. You can go or stay or do as you please."

"Me," growled Dave Burke, "I'm not stayin' on for any damn man who'd do what Addis done. I'm drawin' my time. When I ride, I want to ride for a man, not a—jelly-fish. What the hell ever made him do it, anyhow?"

Buck told them, briefly, what Addis had just told him. "In a way, I can see his point, boys. He's an old man. Give him the advantage of the doubt."

"How about that girl?" asked Sig Loftus. "Did Jaeger or Cutts really hurt her in any way? If they did, by God, I'm goin' scalp-huntin'."

"Miss Harper is all right," said Buck. "But that don't excuse Jaeger and Cutts

—none whatever. There are two coyotes whose hides need hanging up, boys. We're going to have to do it, if this range is to be a fit place to live on. If you boys want to help in that chore, we'll be glad to have you."

"We're in—up to our necks!" exclaimed Andy Devine. "We're with you, Buck! Where do we start?"

"Right at this ranch. You stay here. Forget about handling cattle for a few days. Keep Winchesters handy, and don't let Jaeger or Cutts or any of their outfit within rifle shot of this place. Do that, and you'll be helping plenty."

"It'll be done," growled Dave Burke. "Done to a queen's taste. How about the old man?"

"He'll stay' here, too. I think this scare has pounded some sense and maybe some backbone into him. I think he'll be willing to fight now."

Buck went over to Bill Morgan and Johnny Frazier, who had lifted Brood Shotwell into the litter. "How's he making it?" Buck asked.

"Pretty fair," said Morgan. "We're taking him to my place. I've sent Gus Howard to town for Doc Pollard. They'll be waitin' at the ranch when we get there. The girl all right?"

"All right. I'm bringing her out to your ranch, too, Bill. She's got spunk. She'll help take care of Brood."

Chapter XII

EMBATTLED RANGE

DOC POLLARD, stocky, cheerful and ruddy-faced, came out of the sick-room, wiping his hands on a towel.

"What's his chances, Doc?" asked Buck Comstock.

"Fifty-fifty. I got the slug. The good Lord must have guided that bullet. An inch right or left, and Shotwell would have been dead, long ago. I'll have a better idea twenty-four hours from now. Right now, I'm worried—but not too much. That girl is a dandy. Having her here as Brood's nurse don't hurt his chances any."

Buck went outside and relayed the news to Bill Morgan, Johnny Frazier, Bud Tharp and the rest. This group had been

discussing the mysterious killing of Judge Henning, the news of which had been brought by Doc Pollard.

"Well," said Johnny Frazier, "that much is settled. Where do we go from here?"

Buck put his right hand in his pocket, turned to Bill Morgan and, with a swift movement, pinned something on Morgan's shirt front. It was a nickled, ball-pointed star—a sheriff's star.

"I took that off of Brood when I first went looking for his wound," he told Bill. "Right now, what this country needs is a sheriff—law, the kind of law Jaeger and Cutts can't bluff or buy or dodge. Brood Shotwell is down on his back. St. Ives, the treacherous skunk, is dead. If Brood was able to talk, he'd be more than willing for Bill to wear that star and go about cleaning house.

"We know that all of this crowd can be trusted. In the light of the things that have happened, that's important. Bill, you're the oldest, the most level-headed of this crowd. Everybody knows you, and you pack a lot of weight. Wear that star, call us your posse, and we'll go get Jaeger and Cutts. We got absolute proof that they run off with Jean Harper. That's plenty of charge for their arrest. We'll carry this fight right into their faces and jam it down their throats. Let's get going—now!"

There was a yell of approbation to this. Bill Morgan nodded slowly. "With you boys behind me, I'd tackle a nest of poison wildcats." He turned to Gus Howard. "See that all of the crew comes along, Gus—except two men to stay here with Bones."

They left Coyote Valley, cut straight across the heart of Timber Valley. Two miles due north they could see the buildings of the J Bar C headquarters. Beyond, swimming in the heat mists, loomed East Butte and West Butte.

Well up toward the buttes, and east, a long, low cloud of yellow dust peeled like a ribbon across the world. Buck Comstock, watching that dust, laid a hand on Bill Morgan's arm and pulled to a halt. He pointed.

"Cattle," he said. "A big herd. They're heading east. Bill, the Wineglass spread is over there. Do you think—"

"Think nothing," growled Morgan. "That's plain sign. The J Bar C is moving

in on the Wineglass. Jaeger and Cutts are forcing their luck too far. We can forget the job we started on. Right now, the thing for us to do is head that herd off. Once they get a foothold in Cotton Valley, they'll be tougher than hell to dig out. Come on! We head for the Wineglass."

They whipped about, set the spurs and tore away to the east and north. Again they crossed Coyote Valley, angled up into the harsh land beyond and drove for the upper end of Cotton Valley. The grim troop rode, intently silent, on horses which flattened out like scared wolves.

The fury of their pace lifted another banner of dust, which was not missed by the men driving that on-moving herd. And so it was that when they burst out into the open, where they could see the Wineglass headquarters, they saw also a tight group of riders racing in at another angle toward the buildings.

Bill Morgan gave a wild yell, waving his arm. The men with him knew what he meant. It was to be a race between them and that other group. Spurs dug deep, quirts were used. The straining horses were smeared with foam.

Buck Comstock, squinting his eyes against the whip of the wind, shouted exultantly: "We got the edge! We're goin' to beat 'em in!"

Evidently that other group of riders realized this fact also, for they suddenly whirled to a stop. The sun glittered on gun barrels as rifles were dragged from scabbards and levered into action.

THE range was long, a good five hundred yards, yet something crackled through the air and told with a fleshy thud. Gus Howard's bronco lunged, staggered, missed its stride and went down, Gus kicking his feet out of the stirrups in the nick of time and rolling free. He came up, roaring mad, jerked his rifle from under the shoulder of the stricken horse and clambered up behind Buck, who had spun his mount to a stop.

"Damn their rotten hearts!" yelled Gus in Buck's ear. "They killed the best little partin'-out bronc that ever packed a kak. Make this goat of yours ramble, Buck. I want to get a cut at those jaspers."

More long-range lead whispered sav-

agely about. Bill Morgan, wise in the ways of battle, roared a command, and his men spread out, no longer riding in a compact group, thus giving the J. Bar C. gunmen small individual targets instead of one solid bulk to shoot at. This strategy carried them safely to the Wineglass headquarters without further casualty.

"Find what shelter you can for the broncs," ordered Morgan. "We'll need 'em later. Bud, take half the men and hole up here around the buildings. The rest of us will mosey out on foot to meet that crowd. Horses are swell to ride on, but tough to shoot off of, especially with rifles. We can spread out and raise hell with that gang if they try and rush us. Come on!"

Rifles in hand, the doughty little group moved away from the ranch buildings, straight toward the first file of cattle, which could now be seen swinging across the wide curve of the upper valley. The riders, who had failed in their attempt to reach the ranch buildings before Morgan and his crowd, were still out there, evidently holding council.

Buck Comstock measured the distance with his eye. "Between six and seven hundred yards, Bill," he yelled. "What say we show 'em we mean business?"

"Fair enough," answered Bill. "Try 'em a gun-full—everybody."

Rifles lifted, steadied, began their thin, snarling challenge. For a moment, it seemed to have no effect. Abruptly, however, one of those distant riders threw his hands high and fell backward from his saddle. At the same instant, a horse began bucking wildly, only to collapse a moment later. That distant group immediately whirled away in retreat, heading back to the herd.

"So far, so good," said Morgan. "We'll wait right here."

Bill Morgan, grizzled and wise, had chosen his strategy perfectly. That herd, to get into the heart of the Wineglass range, had to pass within a short distance of the ranch buildings. To swing it further north meant that it would leave the head of Cotton Valley and end up at the fringe of Big Sage Desert, in the malpais country. The Wineglass headquarters was the key to the whole thing, and Morgan had known it from the first.

That Jaeger and Cutts also recognized

this fact was immediately apparent. Riders dashed out to the point of the herd, halting its progress, circling it, holding the cattle in a compact mass, ready to move in any direction. Now other riders, over a score of them, moved out in front, broke into little groups and began riding in a wide, circling movement, with the evident intent of surrounding the Wineglass headquarters.

Bill Morgan met this move by spreading his defenders in a thin line, all around the ranch buildings. "Get down on your bellies," he told them as he placed each man. "Looks like they're going to rush us. They won't have much chance of tagging you if you stay flat. If the pressure gets too heavy, give back to the buildings and take cover. But make 'em pay plenty for every inch they get."

BUCK COMSTOCK found himself on the north of the ranchhouse. Some seventy-five yards to his left was Johnny Frazier. An equal distance to his right was Gus Howard. Crouched low and peering up ahead of him, Buck saw the same oat-topped ridge on which he had been lying when the scream of Jean Harper had brought him to her rescue from Toad Black. A man coming over the top of that ridge on a horse, he mused, would make a perfect target against the sky. He spread a handful of cartridges on the ground beside him, cracked the action of his rifle, to be sure it was ready, then settled into tense waiting.

The J Bar C force had cut over the ridge, well back to the north. For some time, there was nothing in sight. Buck lifted his head slightly and glanced over at Johnny Frazier, who caught the look and waved. Johnny, thought Buck, was one swell guy, in a fight or out of one. Long, lean and coolly drawling, Johnny would do to ride the river with, any old time. Good-natured and slow to anger, but a buzz-saw on wheels when he did get his roach set.

Well over on the other side of the buildings a lone rifle snarled. It was as though it had been a signal, for the voice of it was picked up and swelled to a roar. Buck, unconsciously twisting his head, to see what was going on, was brought abruptly to matters out in front of him when a bullet chugged savagely into the ground not a

foot from his face, spattering him with stinging bits of earth.

He ducked, his slitted eyes searching along the rim above him. Up there a man was kneeling, gun trained, so it seemed to Buck, dead on him. Buck snapped his own rifle up, but before he could get it into line, Johnny Frazier's rifle crashed. That kneeling figure on the ridge seemed to turn a complete backward somersault.

From the corner of his eye, Buck saw the peak of a sombrero lifting into sight in that fringe of oats against the skyline. His rifle settled against his shoulder. The sights steadied into line and the gun slammed back in recoil. The sombrero disappeared. Yet the thin, wicked lashing of smokeless powder along the top of the ridge grew in volume.

Buck, his eyes straining to pick up another target, could hear lead hissing past him, most of it well above him as it reached for the ranch buildings behind. But soon bullets began chugging into the earth about him, and he knew that another sharpshooter up on the ridge had spotted him.

A muffled, metallic clash sounded. Buck felt a quick, twisting jerk of his left foot and ankle. For a moment he thought he'd been hit, then realized that a speeding slug had split itself on his jutting spur rowel. Buck tried to flatten himself deeper into the hard, sun-baked earth, while he searched the ridge top for sight of the sharpshooter.

For a moment that marksman left Buck alone. Buck looked to his left, just in time to see Johnny Frazier cut loose another shot. He looked to the right, where Gus Howard pulled high on his elbows to work the lever of his rifle.

Gus suddenly jerked spasmodically as a slug told with a fleshy clout. Buck saw the tense life in his arms and shoulders flow out of him, saw the half-opened rifle drop from his hands, saw the stricken man's head roll forward and drop. And then Gus Howard looked just like a discarded bundle of clothes.

A chill went over Buck Comstock, a chill which turned instantly into hot, blind fury. Gus Howard was dead. Buck knew that. Even a mortally wounded man, while life exists at all within him, has substance. But there is no substance to a dead man—just

a flattened, shrunken bundle of clothes. . . .

Buck rose to his knees, to his feet, a hoarse, feral cry of fury in his throat. He started up that slope, running. He heard a dim shouting, but it made no impression on him. He did not know that it was Johnny Frazier, aghast at Buck's reckless, lone charge, howling at him to get down. But when Buck did not heed, Johnny reared up and dashed after him.

Back in the ranch buildings, Bud Tharp began to curse brokenly as he saw those wild two, apparently gone loco, dashing up that slope toward the hungry guns atop it. Bud did the only thing he could to help out. He bawled orders to the men about him, pointing to Buck and Johnny. The punchers understood. They began lacing the top of that ridge with a hurricane of lead, laying down a virtual barrage ahead of that locoed pair.

ALL too soon, Buck and Johnny were so close to the top of the ridge that the men below had to slacken their fire to keep from hitting them. Buck, oblivious to all except the wild fury in him, surged clear on the top of the ridge.

A swarthy, savage-eyed figure, moving at a crouching run, showed along the far side of the ridge, trying to keep down below the range of lead which had lashed the ridge top a moment before. He saw Buck at the same instant that Buck saw him. The fellow jerked his gun up. Buck fired at him as he would at a running deer, and the man spun around and dropped.

The next second something crashed against the back of Buck's legs, knocking him sprawling. That something was Johnny Frazier's body. And Johnny rolled right on up to the small of Buck's back, and held him down.

"You ravin', wild-eyed lunatic!" panted Johnny. "Stay flat before I larrup you one with a gun. D'you want to get both of us killed?"

Buck struggled to get free. "They killed Gus Howard," he gulped hoarsely. "They killed Gus, I tell you! I saw the bullet hit him."

"Gettin' yourself killed won't help Gus," growled Johnny. "You can't lick this whole gang single-handed. Stay down, you spavin-brained tarantula bug. Promise to

stay down, or I'll hold you here until you grow whiskers."

Buck's brain cleared of that first wild, feral fury. He dropped his head against his forearm and nodded. "Okay, Johnny. You win."

Johnny slithered out beside Buck. "You watch south, I'll watch north," he said. "We lather these jaspers on the flank and they'll high-tail it in a hurry."

Buck lifted himself high enough in the wild oats to look south along the ridge. He could not see anyone, but just for luck he searched the sun-dried grass with three or four slugs. This brought a startled, wild-eyed waddy into view, who popped from the grass like a jumped coyote. The fellow seemed to understand the situation in a glance, for with no attempt to fight back he angled down the east slope of the ridge at a dead run, tearing for a group of ground-reined horses in the hollow.

It would have been simple enough to have knocked him over, but Buck had no stomach for the deed. He contented himself with dusting those flying boot-heels with whistling lead, which brought an amazing burst of speed from the fleeing puncher. Into the midst of the snorting horses charged the fellow, to pop immediately into a saddle and swing out to the east at a dead run.

Further down the ridge someone was yelling wildly. Then, from various points, four more men appeared, racing for the horses. Buck allowed them to reach their broncs and spur away. Panic is an insidious thing, stampeding even the most valiant at times. Convinced by the sight of their fleeing comrade that something was decidedly wrong, the attackers cleared out in a hurry, swinging beyond rifle range and circling back toward the cattle herd, well to the north.

Things were quiet along the ridge now. But there were still three riderless horses down in that hollow. Buck's brain was working logically again. That kneeling man Johnny Frazier had cut down, that sombrero he himself had driven a bullet through, and then that swarthy ridge-hopper—three men and three riderless horses. The account was pretty well squared for Gus Harper.

Johnny Frazier came over to Buck.

"Looks like things have kinda fallen apart on their side," he drawled.

Buck nodded. "They scared easier than I thought they would."

Johnny looped his rifle under one arm and built a cigarette. "Those jaspers are only fightin' for wages," he said. "We're fightin' for our range. That makes a difference, Buck."

A survey of the situation on all sides showed that the attack had broken up. Gunfire had died to only a few last sporadic reports, long-range shots that carried an expression of hate, rather than any hope of hitting. Buck and Johnny, from the elevation of the ridge, could see the J Bar C forces circling wide of the Wineglass ranch buildings and drifting back to the herd. There was more than one empty saddle among them.

"The party," drawled Johnny Frazier, "is over. Mister Jaeger and Mister Cutts seem to have burned their fingers. They made a fool play, in the first place, trying to rush this ranch with all the boys holed up and ready for 'em."

Buck nodded. "Let's go down—and get Gus."

They carried the body of Gus Howard into the ranch buildings, where grim, hard-eyed men met them. Bud Tharp came out to meet them. He asked no question, for he had eyes to see. "A good man," he said softly. "We'll miss him."

"Any more?" asked Johnny.

"Tim Donovan is pretty hard hit. I'm afraid for him. Jigger Lewis has a smashed arm and Porky Powers got nicked in the shoulder. Bill Morgan has a broken leg."

Bud had a smear of blood along the angle of his jaw. "They didn't miss you more than a mile," said Johnny Frazier.

Bud felt his jaw, looked at his hand, shrugged. "Come on. We got work to do."

While they were checking up and caring for their wounded, Tim Donovan died. The others were not too seriously wounded, though Bill Morgan was cursing harshly over the pain of his wounded leg. Bud Tharp sent out a couple of riders to scout the future moves of the J Bar C contingent.

Buck Comstock went over to Bill Morgan. "This," said Morgan, touching his wounded leg, "makes me of little use with the star. Who'll we put it on next, Buck?"

"That's easy," said Bud Tharp. "Here!"

He took the star, turned and pinned it on Buck. "What you say goes, Buck. We'll follow you to hell and gone."

"Correct," chimed in Johnny Frazier.

"Fair enough," said Buck soberly. "I'll do my best. The quicker we can settle this, the less good men will have to die. I'm going after Jaeger and Cutts."

Chapter XIII

PORT FOR TWO

THE scouts whom Bud Tharp has sent out came back to report that the J Bar C herd had been turned and started back the way it had come.

"Maybe they mean it; maybe it's only a bluff," said Buck. "Either way, we play our cards careful. The wounded will head for the Circle Star. Chances are Doc Pollard is still there, lookin' after Brood Shotwell. The rest of us will follow that herd and make sure it isn't a bluff. After that—Jaeger and Cutts. I'll put 'em behind the bars—or in their graves—if it's the last thing I ever do."

Bill Morgan, Jigger Lewis and Porky Powers, rudely bandaged, were lifted into their saddles. "Think you can make it, Bill?" asked Buck anxiously.

"Hell, yes!" snorted Morgan. "It'll take more than a smashed leg to put me all the way down. And listen, kid, don't get too reckless. The way things are shaping now, we got a definite edge on that pair of polecats. But play your cards careful. There won't be no satisfaction for us in winning, if you go get yourself killed. Was I you, I'd let those two jaspers stew in their own juice for a time, while I went to work and gathered up a few loose ends and found where they led to."

"What you driving at?" Buck frowned.

"Who killed Judge Henning, and why?" grunted Morgan. "And why did St. Ives shoot Brood Shotwell in the back?"

"I think I can answer that last one," said Buck, his eyes narrowing. "St. Ives was another rat bought by J Bar C money. He knew that Jean Harper was held at the Stirrup Cross, and when he realized that Brood Shotwell was going to search the place, he shot him in the back. That's the

way it looks to me. Well, you get along and have that leg taken care of. I'll try and keep a head on my shoulders, Bill."

"You do that," growled Morgan. "Don't go chargin' up any more ridges with the idea of lickin' the whole wide world single-handed. You may be a lot of man, but there's limits. Damn this leg!"

The three wounded men rode off for the Circle Star. At the Wineglass there ensued a period of grim-faced labor with pick and shovel. Then Buck took Johnny Frazier and Bud Tharp aside and explained what Bill Morgan had said.

"I think he's right," nodded Bud Tharp. "If we go pile-drivin' in on that outfit, there'll be a lot of us where Gus and Tim are now. The sane, sensible play is to work around until we can snap up Jaeger and Cutts without getting tangled with their crew. Without them, the crew won't fight."

"We'll try it," said Buck. "Johnny and me are cutting out for town. Bud, you take the rest of the boys and kind of hang out behind that herd, to make sure it's driven back where it belongs. Once it is back on J Bar C range, you can cut for town if you feel like it and see how things are shaping up. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough," nodded Bud.

AT A LITTLE past midday, Buck Comstock and Johnny Frazier rode into Twin Buttes. The town seemed a trifle busier than was usual at this time of day.

"Not all of the J Bar C crowd was with that herd," drawled Johnny softly.

Buck nodded. "We'll look around," he said briefly, reining in and dismounting before Pete Allen's store. They went in and found Pete Allen alone, a stocky, powerfully built man with a square jaw, bristling hair and direct, shrewd eyes. He stared at Buck in patent amazement.

"Well," he said slowly, "I'll be eternally damned!"

Buck smiled. "I reckon it does sort of surprise you, Pete, to see me here, wearing Brood Shotwell's star."

"Surprised," ejaculated Allen, "is hardly the word. I'm plumb flabbergasted."

"There's a story behind it all, Pete," said Buck.

"There must be. There shore must be. Where the hell is Brood? And where is

Spike St. Ives? And what's going on out on the range that's keeping Doc Pollard? There's a lot of damn funny things going on around here that's got a lot of us fighting our heads. Here somebody put a slug through Judge Henning. Not two hours ago Buss Shugrue got the shock of a lifetime. He went to the livery barn barley bin to do a little feeding. And when he opened the bin, what did he find? I'll tell you what he found. He found Duke Younger in that bin, dead as a mackerel. He'd had his skull knocked in."

Buck looked at Johnny-Frazier. "That's news aplenty, Pete—about Younger, I mean," he said. "Who, I wonder, would have killed him?"

"Don't ask me. I tell you I'm plenty spooked the way things are going," growled Allen. "And you still ain't told me how you, a fugitive of justice, is waltzing around free and easy and wearing the star of the man supposed to be out looking for you."

Buck looked Allen straight in the eye. "Pete, you're square—and sensible. Here's the story." He told then of the dastardly attempt on Brood Shotwell's life by Spike St. Ives, and of the abrupt finish of St. Ives. He told of the attempt of the J Bar C to take over the Wineglass and throw a herd of J Bar C cattle onto the Wineglass range. He told of finding Jean Harper and her story of abduction by Leek Jaeger and Frank Cutts. He told of the confession of Duke Younger and Toad Black that the jury had been bought.

"All of that, Pete, is why I'm here, wearing this star," he said. "St. Ives is dead and Brood Shotwell had wounded. Somebody has to represent the law, with hell breaking loose the way it is. Bill Morgan started out to wear this star, but he got a smashed leg in that brawl out at the Wineglass. So he moved the star onto me."

"There'll be some who'll question that authority—from you, Buck," said Pete Allen gravely.

"Do you?"

"No. I never was satisfied the way you were treated in that trial. I know several folks who feel the same way. It won't be us you'll have to worry about. But Jaeger and Cutts will buck plenty."

"I expect them to," nodded Buck. "It

won't do 'em any good, though. Pete, back of all the hell on this range stand Jaeger and Cutts. Think over all I've told you and see if you don't get the same picture."

A shadow darkened the store doorway. A man, squinting into the gloom, came a few steps inside. It was Rope Tenny, one of the J Bar C punchers. Of a sudden he froze. He had recognized Buck Comstock. His breath gave out in a startled hiss. He whirled toward the door.

"**H**OLD it, Tenny!" Buck rasped. "I got a gun on you."

"And I'm backing Buck's play all the way, Rope," added Johnny Frazier.

Tenny halted, his hands lifting slightly. "What yuh want with me?" he growled. "I ain't done a thing."

"No," drawled Buck. "But you would have. Come over here."

Johnny Frazier, at a nod from Buck, took Tenny's gun.

"Who," demanded Buck, "is over in the Yellow Horse?"

Tenny shrugged. "Just a few of the gang."

"Are Jaeger and Cutts there?"

"No."

"Will they be there anytime today?"

"Mebby—mebbly not," growled Tenny. "I don't know what their plans are."

"Keep your eye on him, Johnny," said Buck. "I want to take a look-see."

He moved up at an angle to the door and peered out. Over across the street, grouped about the door of the Yellow Horse, were nearly a dozen riders. The eyes of all of them were on the store. In the forefront of the crowd stood a wiry, compact man, carrying two guns slung low and tied down. Even at the distance a livid, ugly scar across the man's face was visible.

Buck turned back into the store, shot out a long arm and caught Rope Tenny by the slack of his shirt. "They sent you over here—to find out what?" he growled.

"Nobody sent me," blurted Tenny. "I came over here to get some smoking."

"That's a lie. You can buy Durham in the Yellow Horse. There's a dozen men over there, with Whistler Hahn in front of them, watching this store. Untangle that crooked tongue of yours or . . ."

Tenny licked his lips. "I was to find out who was with Frazier," he admitted. "Nobody saw you two jaspers ride in, but one of the boys spotted that claybank of Frazier's. They didn't recognize the other bronc, and they wondered who was with him. That—that's all I know."

Buck pushed him away, went back to the door. Whistler Hahn was haranguing the group in front of the Yellow Horse.



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Abruptly the group split up, some going up the street, some down. Hahn, with three others, started toward the store.

"We're in for it, Johnny," said Buck over his shoulder. "Tie Tenny up. Pete, your store may get some holes shot in it."

"Fair enough," said Pete Allen calmly. "Close the door if you want to, Buck."

"Not yet. Maybe in a minute or two. How's your back door?"

"I'm going to lock it right now."

"Watch that Hahn jasper close, Buck," warned Johnny Frazier. "He didn't get his reputation because he was slow on the draw. Quiet down there, Tenny, or I'll bend a gun over your head."

Buck drew both belt guns and poised himself just off the flare of daylight which came in the open door. A moment later his voice rang out, cold and crisp: "Far enough, Hahn! What's eatin' you?"

Outside, Whistler Hahn stopped; as did the three men behind him. His hand dropped to his gun. "We're lookin' for Rope Tenny," he said, his words carrying that sibilant, whistling note which had given rise to his nickname. "He in there?"

"He's in here," answered Buck. "And he's staying here. Anything else?"

"I know that voice," cried one of the men with Hahn. "It's Buck Comstock!"

Buck knew the gage was up. He leaped to the heavy, sliding door, threw his weight against it. The door slid shut with a bang. Pete Allen, appearing from nowhere, threw the heavy, locking hasp into place.

OUTSIDE sounded a volley of shrill, whistling curses, then a thudding roll of gunfire. Lead cracked through the door, peeling back big, white splinters. The two front windows, one on either side of the door, small and high up, dropped shattered glass as lead cut through them. Long, pealing yells echoed over the town.

Johnny Frazier, finished with the task of tying up Rope Tenny, came over beside Buck. "This," he drawled, "looks interestin'."

Buck nodded. "It's tough on Pete, though. I was a damn fool to come here."

"Don't worry about me or the store," said Pete Allen quietly. "I ain't altogether blind. I've seen a showdown coming up for a long time between the J Bar C and

the rest of the Twin Buttes range. All the time, I knew there was only one side for me. That's the side I'm on now. I'll see your crowd through, Buck."

"That's white of you, Pete. When this is over, our side won't forget."

At that moment there sounded several heavy blows at the back of the store. "They're working on the back door," exclaimed Pete. "I'll discourage that pronto."

He grabbed a six-shooter from under his counter and ran to the rear of the place, back where the shadows were deep and thick amid piles of merchandise that filled the gloom. The next moment the confines of the store shuddered under the rolling snarl of several shots. Outside, rose a howl of pain, then a string of bawling curses.

"I gave 'em a gun-full," yelled Pete Allen. "They won't get so close again."

Answering lead crashed through the back door. And Allen, with Johnny Frazier's help, quickly threw up a barricade of sacked flour.

"Let 'em shoot and be damned now!" Allen panted. "They won't get far."

Out in front, things quieted somewhat. Then came the challenge of Whistler Hahn's voice: "Listen to gospel, Allen. Turn Frazier and Comstock out here or it'll be the worse for you. If you want your store left in one piece, turn 'em out."

"I stick to my friends, Hahn," Allen answered him. "And you're not one of them."

Again came that burst of furious, cursing and another volley of lead into the heavy front door.

"I reckon," said Johnny Frazier, drawing a gun and moving over to one of the front windows, "I reckon we might as well start shootin' for keeps. If we could get that wolf of a Hahn down, it might take a lot out of that crowd. I'm gonna try."

"Take it easy," warned Buck. "They'll be watchin' those windows."

Johnny flattened against the wall, tipped his gun over the sill and started to rise up for a quick snap-shot. The next moment a livid stream of sparks bloomed and Johnny's gun was smashed from his grip and to the floor. Johnny whirled away from the window, gripping his right hand and swearing savagely.

"You hit, boy?" cried Buck anxiously. "No," rasped Johnny. "But they shot my gun out of my hand."

In the dim light, Buck examined Johnny's hand. There was new blood on it, but Buck saw with relief that the blood came from shallow surface cuts where the lead of the speeding slug had spattered. Also, there was a slight cut on Johnny's jaw.

Now another slug came through that same window and slogged into a barrel of dried apricots, not far from the door.

"Thought so," exclaimed Pete Allen. "Somebody is up high, shootin' down through that window. The slug that hit your gun, Johnny, came from a rifle. I could tell by the report."

Buck glanced from the apricot barrel to the window, judging the angle. "Break me out a new rifle, Pete," he ordered. "Wipe the grease out of it and bring it here with some cartridges."

Over the roar of battle outside, sounded the tattoo of speeding hoofs. Buck sought the safer window and took a quick look.

"Jaeger and Cutts!" he exclaimed. "With six or eight more men. Now we do catch hell, boys."

"Here's your rifle," said Pete Allen, thrusting the weapon into Buck's hand. "And it's loaded."

Chapter XIV

FIGHTING MAN'S SHOWDOWN

BUCK nodded, moving to the left-hand window and back a trifle from it.

He could see the enemy rifleman now. The fellow was standing on a support behind the false front of the Yellow Horse, with head and shoulders visible, a rifle cuddled to his face. Even as Buck looked that rifle leaped in recoil and another whistling bullet came through the right-hand window, slamming into the floor.

Buck did not hesitate. His own rifle spat flame, with a ringing report.

It was as though a hurricane's gust had struck that man on the false front across the street. He was whipped back from his perch, and Buck distinctly heard the crash of his fall as he struck the roof of the Yellow Horse. A moment later his body

came into view again, rolling down the slant of the roof and plummeting to the ground.

"They want hell," growled Buck savagely. "They can have it."

The killing of the J. Bar C sharpshooter brought a reaction of curses and angry yells, and then a hail of lead, ripping through both windows and both doors.

"I'm sorry, Pete," said Buck. "They're going to make a mess out of this store."

"Sorry, be damned!" snorted Pete. "I'm not sorry. I'm mad—plenty. Just because they want to get hold of you, is no excuse for that gang to shoot my store all to hell and gone. It's high time Jaeger and Cutts and their crowd got their ears knocked down. And I'm aiming to sit into this thing until that comes to pass. Don't you worry none about my store. I'll take the pay for all damage out of their cursed hides."

Buck and Johnny made no attempt to answer the shooting. They crouched, out of line, and let the slugs drive past. If the hostile force did nothing more than shoot through door and window, they never would get any results.

As though realization of this came to the attackers, the fire dwindled and died. Pete Allen came sliding over beside Buck. He had a doublebarreled shotgun in his hands.

"I ain't got a load of buckshot in the joint," he complained disgustedly. "I got some ordered, but they ain't showed up yet. I got plenty of quail loads, though. And at close range they'll discourage some of those bimbos."

Outside, came a shout. It was Leek Jaeger, and he addressed his remarks to Pete Allen. "We want Comstock," he bawled. "We're going to get him, one way or another. Better listen to reason, Allen. If you want any store left, run Comstock out of there. You won't get another chance."

"If he's in the open," growled Pete, "I'll answer him."

The doughty storekeeper slipped over to a window, stood on his tiptoes and looked out. Instantly his shotgun leaped to his shoulder and roared. From the far side of the street sounded a shriek of pain and surprise. Pete Allen came back to Buck and Johnny, laughing softly.

"It was Jaeger," he chuckled. "He had turned to talk to somebody in the Yellow Horse and I shore lathered his britches with birdshot. I shore woke him up; and he hit for shelter lickety-larrup."

There came another flurry of shots; then another period of silence. This stillness lasted so long it became ominous.

Buck prowled to a window, took a quick survey. "Nobody in sight," he announced. "But they're figuring up some devilry. I can feel it."

As if in answer to this observation, the whole store building shook under the impact of a terrific crash. Wood splintered and metal hinges squealed in protest. It was as though an earthquake was shaking the store.

"The back door!" yelled Buck. "They've rammed it in!"

At the same moment another hail of lead smashed into the front of the store.

IT was Pete Allen, with his scattergun, who turned the tide. He leaped to one side, so that he could see back the length of the store. There the splintered, unhinged door, transixed on the end of a heavy timber which had served the attackers as a battering ram, lay crookedly across the barricade of sacked flour which Pete had thrown up.

A group of men fought to crowd their way through the aperture. Once that group got inside the store, the answer would be quick.

Pete Allen swung up his scattergun and drove two loads of birdshot into their midst.

That hail of fine shot was not fatal, but it was painful and blinding and disconcerting. The charge broke and the men scattered, cursing frenziedly.

But the respite was of short duration. Through that shattered door now came a veritable sleet of lead, fanning right and left, the length of the store.

Johnny Frazier gasped, reeled and went down. Instantly Buck Comstock was on his knees beside him. "Johnny! Johnny! God, man, where did they get you?"

But Johnny did not answer. His head, as Buck tried to lift it, lolled limply from side to side. Down one cheek, staining Buck's lifting fingers, was a thickening fan of blood.

Buck went cold all over. His eyes seemed to sink into his head and the muscles of his face tautened until his profile was bony and rigid. He rose to his feet, caught up his rifle, started for that back door.

"Watch the front, Pete!" he rasped.

The shooting through the rear door stopped. Then there sounded a rush of booted feet, and again the opening was jammed with charging men. Into the very center of that mass, Buck levered his rifle empty. He grabbed it by the barrel then, and hurled it after the lead it had thrown. He whipped out both belt guns and began rolling them.

Before that fusillade dead men slumped limply down. Wounded men fell on top of them. Others, who by some miracle had escaped that merciless lead, fought their way free of the shambles and rushed away, terror-stricken.

Mechanically, Buck Comstock punched the empty shells from his guns, thumbing fresh loads into the cylinders, then started for that open door. He was through skulking in cover, through with situations which had brought death to his friends—first Gus Howard, then Tim Donovan, now Johnny Frazier! And there were Jigger Lewis and Bill Morgan and Porky Powers wounded—while he, who was really the crux of the whole set-up, was still untouched.

Yes, he was done with skulking. He was going out after Leek Jaeger and Frank Cutts. He was going to punch their tickets—with hot lead.

Behind Buck, Pete Allen was yelling at him, begging him to wait, begging him not to go out. Buck never heard him. He stalked to that rear door, climbed over the tangle of dead and dying men and swung outside.

He went up the alley, a tall, lean, figure, leaning slightly forward, as though he was following the trail of some stampeded quarry. And his eyes, set far back in his tight-locked countenance, burned like feverish coals.

And then, when he was less than a dozen steps from the end of the alley, two men turned into it from the street. Recognition was instantaneous. Those two were Leek Jaeger and Whistler Hahn!

THE advantage of surprise lay with Buck. He was strung to a state of cold, rigid, mechanical purpose. He was beyond a condition where anything might surprise or upset him. On the other hand, Buck Comstock was the last person in the world whom Jaeger and Hahn would expect to find marching up the alley toward them.

Buck threw his first shot at Whistler Hahn, almost as though his subconscious self had analyzed the situation and warned him that Hahn was the more dangerous of the two. The lead went home, for Hahn spun around, staggered and leaned against the outer wall of the store for support. But he did not go down. He whipped out one gun and began to shoot.

Buck minded that shooting not one whit. His blazing eyes were on Leek Jaeger's stumpy figure now, and he was throwing lead at that man. He was throwing bullets much as he would have thrown his fists, with an unconscious hunching of his shoulder at each shot, and a low, panting *huh-huh-huh*, as though he was driving that lead home with physical as well as mechanical force.

Jaeger had started for his guns, but got neither of them out of the leather. Buck's first slug took him deep in the body. Jaeger reeled backward, his hands thrown up before his face as though he would ward off some dread spectre. Then he began to sag. Suddenly he halted in his backward stagger, rocked forward on his toes and pitched out on his face.

At that moment something struck Buck a terrific blow in the chest. It sent him reeling the entire width of the alley. His knees started to sag under him, but somehow he kept himself erect, his burning eyes whipping over to Whistler Hahn. The gunman had slid down until he was half-lying, half-sitting on the ground. Hahn's rodent teeth were bared in a set snarl and his eyes were a weasel red. He was trying to set his gun on a line with Buck's heart.

Buck shot twice, mechanically. Hahn's head jerked back and he flattened out in a twisted, awkward heap. Buck staggered and went down on one knee.

For a moment, he stayed there. There was a livid fire burning in his chest now, and a deathly weakness gripped at his

vitals. A haze was gathering before his eyes. He shook his head savagely in an effort to clear his vision.

Slowly he got back to his feet. The job wasn't over with yet. Frank Cutts still remained. He had to wipe out the last of that rat nest. He had to get Cutts!

He took one step. He took another. He went up the alley to the street in staggering lurches, like a man in the last stages of drunkenness. This alley, which always before had seemed reasonably level, had suddenly become filled with dips and ridges and hollows, countless hazards to stumble over. And that agony in his chest was spreading now, and his legs were growing numb.

Suddenly the alley was gone and he was in the street. There was a roaring in his ears, a rapidly growing thunder. Up the street came a madly riding bunch of men

Was that damned haze before his eyes tricking him or was it really Bud Tharp riding at the head of that charging group of riders? Damn that haze! He hadn't realized it was so late. The sun must have gone down. It sure as hell was getting dark!

Over across the street, in the doorway of the Yellow Horse, a single shot blared. Another terrific force struck Buck Comstock, this time high in the right shoulder. The impact spun him around. His knees gave way entirely this time. He vaguely felt the impact of the ground striking him, and then blackness carried him away. . . .

And so it was that Buck did not see Bud Tharp, shooting from the saddle at a wild riding speed, cut down on Frank Cutts as the latter stood in the doorway of the Yellow Horse, just in the act of levering another cartridge into the rifle he held.

Bud Tharp never made a better shot. His .45 slug took Cutts just above the left eye. Cutts crumpled where he stood. .

Chapter XV

THE TRAIL TO HEAVEN

BUCK COMSTOCK had the feeling that he had been away on a long, long journey, before coming back to the world of men. He climbed up and up from immeasurable depths, through a pit full of

grisly horrors. He reached the top of the pit and floated away on soft, white, restful clouds.

Then, even in this haven of clouds, were the devils from the pit. They stuck their damned fingers into his chest and shoulder, torturing him with a million prying pitchforks. He tried to cuss 'em, but somehow it was too much trouble. Maybe if he pretended not to notice, they'd leave him alone . . . Then he went back to sleep.

Came a day when a bright, living warmth lay on his face and made him open his eyes. He blinked painfully. Why, it was the sun, good old sun, that made that brightness and warmth! Buck sighed, grinned, and fell asleep once more. His strength came back quickly after that.

And one fine morning he awoke to discover that it wasn't white clouds he was resting on, but clean white sheets. He was in bed. He looked around him, turned his head to one side. There, on another bed not far away, was Johnny Frazier. Johnny had a big, white bandage about his head and was sitting up, propped against some pillows, reading a lop-eared magazine.

"Hi!" whispered Buck weakly. "Hi, you ol' leather-pounder! How's things?"

Johnny's bandaged head jerked around, and a look of keen pleasure came over his face. He grinned. "Hi, yourself, old thunder-bug! How you feelin'?"

"Hungry," Buck whispered. "Hungry as hell! Don't they ever feed a man around this spread?"

Before Johnny could answer, a door creaked slightly as it opened. Through the door came Doc Pollard—and Jean Harper, prettier than any girl had a right to be, in starched, spotless gingham. Johnny nodded toward Buck.

"He's awake at last, Doc. And he's hungry."

"Fine!" effused the doctor. "He's got his feet back on the trail."

Doc and Jean Harper came over and stood beside Buck's bed. "So you're hungry, eh?" grinned Doc. "About time you perked up. You've given us some mighty tough moments, Buck. Four different times I gave you up. But Jean here . . . Say, this girl don't know what it is to cry quits. She insisted you'd live. And by golly, you're

going to. Jean, you can get him a cup of thin broth."

The girl nodded and went out, while Doc peeled back the covers and prodded around Buck's chest and shoulder. "So you're the ol' devil that kept stickin' his fingers into me all the time," Buck accused weakly. "I used to cuss that devil."

Doc Pollard laughed. "I had to dig deep, Buck, to get out the lead you were packing. But I got it."

He covered Buck as Jean Harper came in with the broth. She pulled up a chair beside Buck's bed, to feed him, while Doc turned to examine Johnny Frazier's head.

"Hate to be a baby," Buck muttered. "Be able to feed myself one of these days."

She laid a cool, fragrant palm on his lips. "Hush! No more talking. Go to sleep now."

She smiled gravely at him and Buck obediently closed his eyes and drifted off, remembering how soft her hand had been on his lips.

TWO WEEKS later Buck Comstock was sitting up in bed. Doc Pollard had sent old Tony Chavez, the town barber, up; and Buck was shaved and shorn for the first time in a month. He was eating solid food now, and the pinched tightness of his face was gone. He was feeling like a real human again.

The door opened and Bud Tharp came in. Behind him, stumping along on a clumsily handled pair of crutches, came Bill Morgan.

"About time," said Buck. "You two jiggers would leave a guy in this danged hotel to rot before you'd come around and say howdy."

"We'd have come sooner, only Doc wouldn't let us," grinned Bud. "I suppose you're honing to hear the story?"

"Yeah," Buck grunted. "I got things figured out up to the time that last slug hit me. Who threw that one, anyhow?"

"Cutts. I dropped him cold the next second. There ain't no J Bar C anymore, Buck. You did for Jaeger and Whistler Hahn, and I got Cutts. Things are healthy once more on Twin Buttes range."

"Did you find out who killed Judge Henning and Duke Younger?"

"No. Maybe we never will. Brood Shotwell—he's comin' along fine now . . .

Well, Brood figures that maybe Spike St. Ives might have killed Judge Henning—either him or Toad Black. And he figures that maybe Toad Black killed Duke Younger. Brood said it was Younger who first caved and admitted that jury was bought. Maybe Black killed him because he squealed."

Buck nodded. "That whelp, Toad Black—I'm sorry he got away. He tried one trick—the dirtiest of all. I'd feel better—"

"Calm yourself," grunted Bill Morgan. "Don't get excited, kid. Toad Black is all done. He made the mistake of trying to get even with Bones Baker. The day after the big brawl here in town, Bones went out to get a armful of stove wood. Black was hid out up west of the ranch-house and cut loose at Bones. Bones came right back at him. He let go a slug that removed Toad Black from this earth—plumb complete."

Buck grinned. "Good ol' Bones." Buck sobered again. "Money can be all right," he murmured. "But when it's dirty money and buys up the honor and souls of men—it's the lowest thing on earth. Call the roll and see what J Bar C money did. But all that is history. Might as well forget it now. It seems good to be square with the world once more—and to know you got friends."

"Come on, Bill," scoffed Bud Tharp. "We stick around here any longer and that big wallop will be weepin' on our shirts. Besides, we got work to do. You—" and he leveled a forefinger at Buck—"you better be up and doin', young feller. You got a ranch to handle. Besides, your neighbor at the Wineglass, bein' what you might call a lady tenderfoot, she'll probably need some advice on how to run a cow outfit from an up-and-coming young gent about your size and complexion."

"You can go plumb to hell," said Buck, grinning.

Bud Tharp and Bill Morgan were both laughing as they went out.

Their departure left Buck restless. When Doc Pollard dropped in for a couple of minutes later in the day, Buck broached the subject of getting up and forking leather again.

Doc shrugged. "Take it easy, cowboy. No sense in rushing things. Ask me the same question a week or ten days from

now and I might consider it. You got to learn to walk again before you can ride."

This, Buck found, was mighty true. And it was nearer three weeks than ten days before, one warm, drowsy morning, he led a pony from the livery barn, swung stiffly into the saddle and reined away from town.

IT sure was good to be in the leather once more, watching a pony's ears bobbing in front of you. And the old range country, though it was plenty familiar, looked different, somehow. Take East Butte and West Butte, for instance. Funny that he'd never noticed how rich their coloring was, with that pale violet sun haze misted about them. And the range itself, all tawny and gold, with the larks whistling and the bees digging out a winter store of sage honey . . .

You had, Buck mused, to go way, way down into the cold depths and watch Old Man Death leering at you and grabbing at you, before you could really appreciate the sun and the world. Yes, you had to go through all that to really know the pleasure of living.

Buck crossed Timber Valley, where the former J. Bar C headquarters stood forlorn and deserted. He crossed Coyote Valley, stopping only once, to look at a white-face cow fondly licking a knobby-kneed, shakylegged little white-face bummer. And when the cow bellowed deep in her throat and eyed Buck suspiciously, he laughed aloud.

"Take that kink outa your tail, old girl," he told the cow. "I ain't goin' to hurt your pop-eyed darlin'. The little devil ain't much to look at now, but he'll make a real beef one of these days."

In the end he came into the north end of Cotton Valley, and looked out ahead of him, where the Wineglass ranch buildings stood. There were two punchers working around the corrals when Buck drew up there, Dave Wilkins and Hobey Sayre, both former Circle Star riders. They hailed him with broad grins.

"Time you was up and around, you damned old sissy," chuckled Dave Wilkins. "How's it feel to be forkin' leather once more?"

"Swell! How-come you boys are workin' here?"

"Bill Morgan sent us up to sort of keep things moving for Miss Jean until she

could get a crew together. Now it looks like Bill had lost two danged good cow nurses. Miss Jean does the cookin' around this spread. And man, do we eat!"

Buck built a cigarette. "Where is your new boss, anyhow? Maybe I'll hit her up for a ridin' job myself."

"Oh, yeah?" snorted Hobey Sayre skeptically. "You ain't foolin' me and Steve—not one little bit. But if you must know, she's up at the house, probably brewin' a couple more pies for supper."

"Pie!" exclaimed Buck. "Say, I'm a drunkard where pie is concerned. I'm goin' up and see if I can't beg a couple of wedges from her."

He left his pony at the corrals and stalked up the low slope to the ranchhouse. He was thinner than he had been, but his step was sure and buoyant. And his eyes were clear and bright and filled with a quick eagerness.

The prophecy by Hobey Sayre was a good one. Buck found Jean in the kitchen, her cheeks flushed with the heat of the stove, her hands and bared forearms dusted with flour. She greeted him with a grave, still sweetness.

"I'm glad to see you up and around again, Buck," she told him quietly.

"I couldn't hang around that hotel room any longer," he said. "You wouldn't come and see me any more, so I had to come out here to you. Why have you stayed away so long, Jean? Soon as Doc was certain I'd get well, you pulled out, and I haven't seen you from that day to this."

She met his eyes for just a second, then looked away and became busy over her kitchen table again. "I had a ranch," she

murmured. "I had to get out and look after it. Besides—" and here her voice became very low—"I knew you knew the trail out here."

Buck moved over and stood beside her. The top of her dark, little head came just to his chin. "There's been a lot of water under the bridge, Jean, since I first saw you. There's a lot of things been done I wish could be undone. But life sort of throws things at a person, and you got to step around 'em and keep on going. There is one thing I'm wondering if you can ever forget."

Her hands rested flat on the table top. She was very still. "You are speaking of Ben Sloan?" she said.

"Yes. Ben Sloan."

"I think we can both forget that, Buck. The first day I ever talked to you—that day when Toad Black . . . Well, that day I believed your story. I still do. There was a time when what happened between you and Ben Sloan would have filled me with horror. But this country has done something to me. It has made me see a lot of things more clearly. I—I only know that you can forget what happened between you and Ben Sloan. I have forgotten it, Buck."

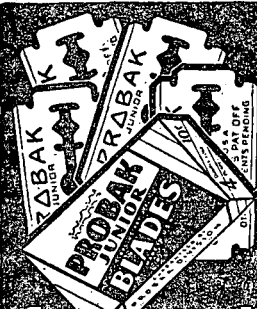
"Then," said Buck, "you—"

She looked straight at him now, and her eyes were clear and deep and glowing. "Yes, Buck," she told him.

His arms went around her and she came to him without the slightest hesitation. And after a bit, when her lips were free once more, she sighed like a contented child.

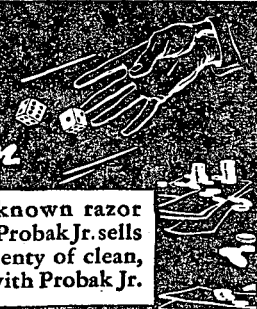
"Buck, I thought you never, never would get well enough to ride—the trail—to me."

THE END



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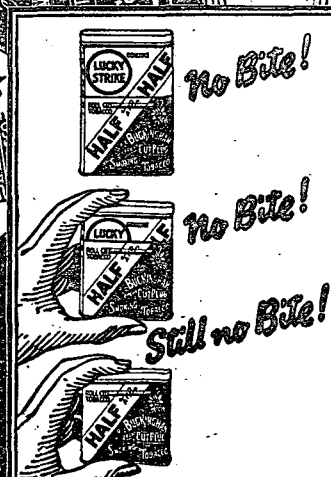
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Either side of the law at Roaring Fork was a danger-packed business that had cost many a gun-proud life. . . . Yet the man named Suffern played both sides—till he turned his irons against a fearless frontier girl who fought with brains as well as bullets!

Chapter I

LAW-TAMER

D EPUTY Sheriff Will Bent, lounging against a porch pillar of the Union House, centered his attention on the man who was the last to climb out of the stage.

"That him?" he asked Sheriff Andy Hayes, who was sitting with his feet cocked up on the railing.

Sheriff Hayes said,

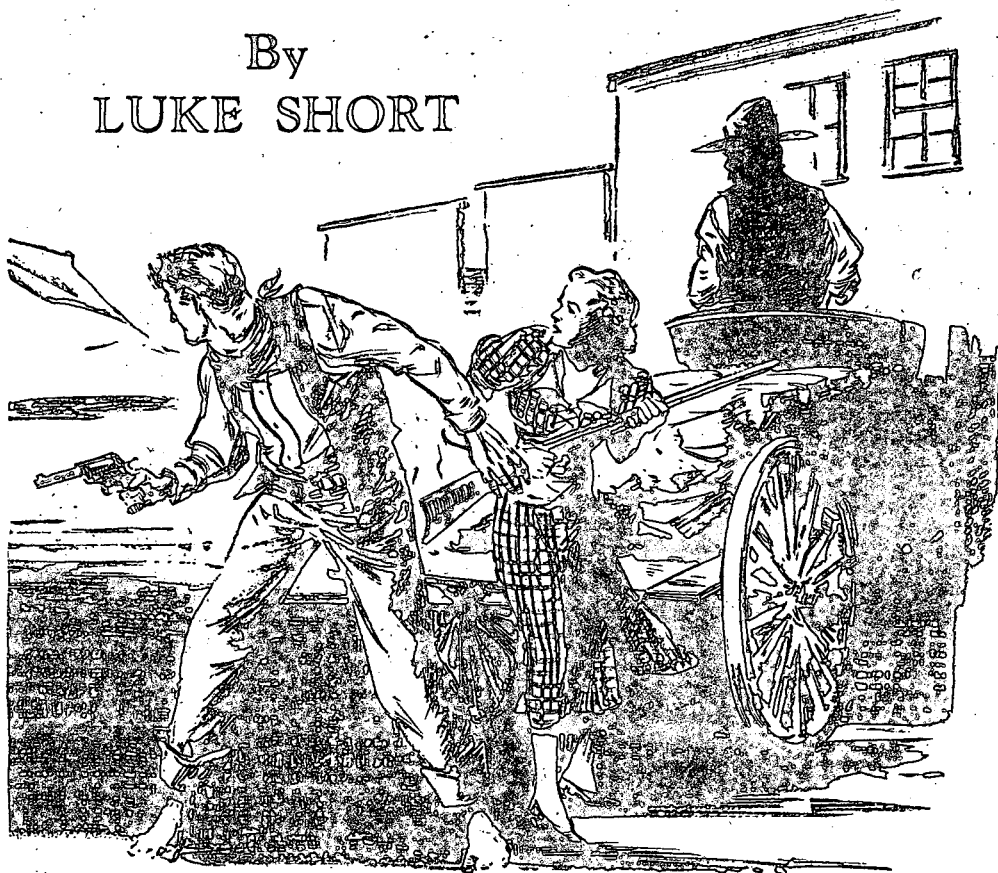
In all that group of miners and travelers who had alighted from the stage, this man they had singled out was the one to catch the eye and hold it. He was burly across the shoulders, of medium height, and his face was so dark that it made the white linen of his shirt almost glow. He was dressed in expensive black, and even at this distance the diamond on his finger gleamed.

Bent straightened up and dropped his cigarette, which had died as he was watch-

BANDIT LAWMAN

*Gripping Novelette of an Honest Law-Rider who Traded
His Star for a Highwayman's Guns*

By
LUKE SHORT



ing the stage unload. "Better give him a few minutes, huh?" he drawled.

"Sure," Hayes said. He looked at Bent, as if to study him. Bent's lean six feet seemed cocked for trouble, his blue eyes amused and at the same time a little hard. Hayes sighed softly. He was an old man now, old and gnarled and white-haired and slow, but still he could enjoy what was coming.

"What's his handle?" Bent drawled:

"Sam Suffern."

Bent only grinned.

Suffern, now, paused and gave loud directions for the disposition of his baggage. Then he stepped up on the boardwalk and

headed down street, a nine-inch cigar jutting from his lips.

Bent looked at Hayes and said, "Lordy, he even acts tough."

Sheriff Hayes waited a few minutes, then hoisted his bulk from the chair and grunted, "Come on."

Together they descended the steps and followed Suffern. The main street of Roaring Fork was settling back into its usual afternoon torpor after the stage arrival. Ponies and buckboards were facing the tie-rails on both sides of the dusty street between the wide canyon of false-front stores.

Bent said, "Where'll I choose him?"

"Let him worry about that."

At the War Bonnet Saloon, they turned in. The usual loafers were bellied up to the bar, while others surrounded the faro and poker tables. Today the crowd was bigger than usual, for almost everyone in town wanted to have a first look at Suffern, the man who had bought out Hank Barber's War Bonnet.

Bent said to the barkeep, "Where's the new boss?"

The bartender gestured with a jerk of his head toward the office door in the side-wall at the foot of the bar.

Almost to the door, Sheriff Hayes and Bent stopped. Suffern stepped out and closed the door behind him.

"Suffern?" Bent asked grimly.

The saloon owner turned to them. His face was surprisingly lean, his lips thin and wide, his nose aquiline. His deep-set eyes were piercing, black, wary. Seeing the badge on their vests, he smiled narrowly.

"Yes." He spoke almost mockingly. "You two gentlemen are the law. Have a drink with me. But first—I don't know your names."

"Never mind the name," Bent said curtly. "You'll know soon enough. And I wouldn't like a drink."

"Nor me," Hayes put in surlily.

Suffern shrugged. "Then what can I do for you?"

THE room had quieted. Most of the men there were listening to the conversation.

Bent said, "We just dropped around to put you straight on a few things, Suffern."

"For instance?"

"When Hank Barber owned this place, it was a hangout for every hard-case on this slope. Nobody ever knowed it, but he was gettin' in more trouble than he could rightly wade out of." Bent paused and eyed Suffern suspiciously. "Nobody knowed where he went when he disappeared. It looks like you're the only man that does."

"Is it the deed to the place you want me to show you?" Suffern asked levelly.

"Not the deed," Hayes said. "I don't give a damn if you robbed Barber to get the place. I'm glad he's gone. I don't even want to know where."

"Nice friendly lawmen here," Suffern commented.

Bent shook his head. "That's where you're wrong, fella'. We're not friendly to you, nor to any man of Barber's stripe. That's just a warnin'. Play your cards close to your chest or you'll lose the pot."

Suffern looked at Bent shrewdly. He said, "I don't like you, Big Wind, and you can paste that in your hat."

"Maybe I'll paste it in yours," Bent drawled.

Suffern said drily, "I never knew it to fail. Pin a star on a thirty-a-month cow nurse and his head gets too big for his ears."

Bent flushed and his hand fell to his shell-belt.

"Don't make the mistake of drawing that gun," Suffern continued. "I never carry one. I never have to when I run into jokers like you."

Bent unbuckled his shell-belt, with its holstered guns, and let it slide to the floor. "I never have to use 'em either, Suffern. When I break things, I like to do it by hand."

"I'd be glad to oblige you."

"Let's make it the street then."

Suffern nodded and peeled off his coat, which he laid on the bar. Everyone in the room had been listening, and now they let Bent, the sheriff and Suffern walk out the door before they moved. Then as if one man, they crowded through after them and swarmed over the sidewalk into the road, forming a loose circle.

Bent was taller than Suffern, longer armed. And, in addition to that, he seemed mad clean through. His huge fists hung clenched at his sides.

Somebody said, "Your hat, Will."

Bent wrenched it off and sailed it into the crowd, then said to Suffern, "Ready?"

"Any time," Suffern replied, his thick shoulders hunched a little.

Bent had been waiting for this. He stepped in, head down; a slugging arc already started with his huge fist. Suffern stood planted in his way. Moving almost indolently, Suffern shot a short jab at Bent and it straightened him up. With his other arm, the saloon owner chopped down on Bent's flailing arm. Then he leaned in, his shoulder catching Bent under the chin and sending him back a step.

Quickly, savagely now, Suffern followed,

his right pumping into Bent's midriff. Bent stepped back again, grunting, trying for a foothold. And then, before he could gather his wits, Suffern hooked at his face viciously—twice. By the time the second blow reached him, Bent was falling. It sounded muffled, as bone on skin-padded bone will. Bent pitched back in the dust, made a slow movement as if to turn over and rise, then lay back and stared at the afternoon sky.

SUFFERN looked down at him a long moment, then dusted his hands together gently and turned to Sheriff Hayes. "Your deputies are a little too salty, Sheriff," he commented drily. "Maybe they need to travel a bit and pick up a few tricks."

Hayes glared at him. "You ain't through with Bent yet, Suffern."

"I don't expect so," Suffern drawled. "Not while he can use a gun."

"This don't change what he said to you—nor what I did," Hayes went on. "You keep in line, here, mister, or you'll have more'n a street brawl on your hands."

A drawling, slow voice from the circle of watchers said, "Don't you reckon the law has rawhided this man enough today, Hayes?"

Hayes turned to confront Barney McCann's look of quizzical distaste. McCann, as usual flanked by two of his men, had a sneering smile on his bland face. Big, blond, blue-eyed and iron-jawed, McCann seldom spoke in a loud voice, but in some way his whisper contrived to carry more conviction than other men's bluster.

Hayes glared at him angrily. "If I was you, McCann, I wouldn't buy into this."

"Not a chance," McCann drawled. "Only I hate to see a stranger get hoo-raved the first half hour he's in town. He might think we're all like you up at the sheriff's office."

"He knows what we are up there. I'll let him make up his own mind about you, Barney."

"That's good."

Hayes said to a long, gangling puncher standing nearby, "Give me a lift with him, will you, Cal?"

Cal Fields and a friend nodded and stepped over to Bent. Suffern, politely watching this conversation, now walked

over and got Bent's hat and laid it on his chest, then stood aside and watched Bent carried upstreet to the sheriff's office next the hotel.

When Hayes had gone, Suffern turned to the crowd. "Let's have a drink, boys. A man doesn't buy a saloon every day."

McCann, from the crowd, added, "Nor make over a deputy's face."

Suffern looked at him and smiled. McCann strode over to him and held out his hand. "Barney McCann's the name, Suffern. That was workmanlike. We've been thinkin' of doin' the same thing for some time now, but I reckon we got used to his noise."

"You'd of done the same thing in my place," Suffern said modestly. "I couldn't very well get out of it." He shrugged, and repeated, "Come on in and have a drink."

UP the street, Sheriff Hayes walked moodily behind Fields and the other men carrying Bent. As he passed Wilke's Emporium, he heard a girl's voice say softly, "Dad. Don't you see me?"

He stopped. There on the top step was a slight girl, bare headed, the sun seeming to touch her corn-colored hair with fire. She was dressed in rough range clothes and cow-boots, which only seemed to accentuate her slim loveliness. She was looking at Bent's slack body, and her mouth was open in surprise.

"What happened, Dad?"

Hayes snorted. "A new hard-case in town."

"Gunfight?"

"Huh-uh. A scrap. Will bit off considerable more'n he could chew."

She shook her head in mock disgust. "Do you two always have to walk around like banty roosters, Dad?"

Hayes' seamed face showed the trace of a smile. "Comin' from you, Mary, that sounds considerable like the cow callin' the bull a four-legged critter."

Mary grinned back. "Well, go with him, Dad. And please stay out of trouble—at least until I leave town tonight."

Sheriff Hayes snorted again and hurried to catch up with the men carrying Bent. Inside the sheriff's office, situated on the corner, he indicated a cot and Bent was laid on it.

"Thanks, boys," Hayes told Fields and his friend.

"Looks like a man don't shake one trouble but what he picks up two more," Fields said. "Here we lose Barber, and damned if we don't trade him for this gent, Suffern—twice as bad."

Hayes sighed and waved them off.

As soon as the door closed, he walked over to Bent, who was grinning up at the ceiling.

"How'd it work, Andy?" Bent asked.

"Couldn't of been better."

"Didn't I hear McCann talkin' to you?"

"Sure. He sided with Suffern."

Bent sat up now and Hayes sat down beside him. They both rolled smokes from the same sack.

Bent said in a soft voice, "Well, it looks like things are shapin' up, Andy—after four years of waitin'."

"Don't be too sure, son. McCann ain't convicted yet."

"All we needed was for Barber to lose his guts. We got a chance now, anyway."

"I wonder," the sheriff said slowly. "When I was younger, if we'd wanted to get the goods on McCann and if Barber could give it to us, we'd have took Barber out and *made* him talk. Now we got to do it legal." He made a wry face. "We buy Barber out and send a range-detective-in to run the saloon in his place. I dunno."

"About Suffern, you mean? You think he can't handle it?"

"I dunno, I say."

Bent rubbed his jaw and grinned ruefully. "I do. If that ranny Suffern is as good a detective as he is a fighter, McCann's as good as convicted right now."

Chapter II

THE BOSS HIRES A GUN

SUFFERN gave orders to the bartenders to serve free drinks, then he and McCann stepped into his office.

McCann looked around and said, "Nothin' changed much, since Hank Barber jumped town."

"Haven't had time," Suffern told him.

The drinks came in. Suffern offered McCann a cigar with his whiskey, which he took.

"Funny thing," McCann said slowly after he had lit his cigar. "I never quite figured out why Hank left."

"Ran away, didn't he?" Suffern said easily.

McCann's pale blue eyes settled on Suffern speculatively.

"Seems so. Why, though?"

"He told me he was gettin' in too deep."

McCann asked slowly, watching him, "Who with?"

Suffern shook his head. "I don't know. I wish I did. I've got an idea that things that were too deep for Barber wouldn't be very deep at all for me."

McCann leaned back in his chair and regarded Suffern with quiet interest. Finally he said, "You've got a medium good opinion of yourself, haven't you, Suffern?"

The saloon keeper nodded. "I've never had any reason to think I'm not just a little better than the run of hard-cases."

"Hard-cases?"

Suffern smiled narrowly. "I think they call you a hard-case when you see something that can be taken and try to take it, don't they?"

"Why'd you come here?"

Suffern shook his head, smiling. "I've known you ten minutes, McCann. Be a little more reasonable."

McCann grinned back at him now. "All right. But what if I was to tell you that I'm the main reason Barber jumped the country?"

"You?" Suffern said softly. "I don't get it."

"Barber got the idea he was gettin' big enough to fit my shoes. I got word of it. I arranged to—er—discipline him. He got word of that some way. He ran."

Suffern nodded slightly. "Barber told me he left a mighty good thing here."

"Like what?"

Suffern moved his hand vaguely. "There's mighty good range down in the valley. There's a lot of mining camps over the mountains here. Cattle can be run across them, I understand."

McCann let his chair come to the floor. "Let's quit this dodging, Suffern. You need me and I need you. Yes, there's cattle below. I rustle them. I sell them in the mining camps. I need a cool head and a man that can't be bluffed by the law.

What'll you take to step into Barber's place?"

"Sixty-forty split," Suffern said quietly. "I'll take the forty only because you put up most of the men."

McCann's eyes narrowed. "That's the split Barber was playing for when he left. That's why he had to go."

"Forty or nothing," Suffern said quietly. "I don't like small change."

"You don't like trouble, either, do you?" McCann asked meaningly.

"I don't mind it at all."

THEY looked at each other a long moment, and then McCann said, "I don't believe you do. All right. But why do you think you deserve that much of a cut?"

Suffern looked at the end of his cigar, then laid it on the desk and leaned forward in his chair. "There's banks in this country, McCann. There's a railroad off south. There's bullion shipments out of these mining camps. There's no law says a man has to stick to cattle stealing."

"It's the only thing I know," McCann said.

Suffern tapped his chest with blunt finger. "It's not the only thing I know. That's why I'll take a forty percent split or run my own game."

McCann nodded thoughtfully. "Too small to suit your taste? Is that it?"

"Not a bit. I just like variety," Suffern said, smiling agreeably.

"For yourself—or for the men you pay?"

Suffern's eyes changed a little, and there was a sudden hardness in them. "I've never asked a man yet to do what I wouldn't do. That's how I got the money to buy Barber out."

"Interesting," McCann commented. He lighted his cigar, watched the match burn out, then dropped it. He looked up at Suffern now, and his face was bland. "There's a payroll leaving the bank tonight, bound for one of the mines just off the pass road. You wouldn't want to pass that up, would you?"

"Would you?"

"This is your brag," McCann drawled. "Make it good."

"All right. When's the stage leaving?"

"It's due out at eight."

"How much in the boot?"

"Not a cent less than four thousand."

Suffern scowled. "Four thousand," he murmured gently, as if to himself. "Hardly enough to make it worth while."

"I thought it would be that way," McCann sneered.

"But I'll do it," Suffern continued, as if he had not heard. "Maybe some of you boys would like to watch how it's done."

"Maybe we would," McCann said softly, and he rose. "Say if I'm here at seven thirty?"

When Suffern nodded, McCann left. Standing in the doorway, waiting for McCann to come out, was one of the gamblers, with a stack of paper in his hand.

"You want to see me now, Suffern?" he asked.

"What about?"

"I'll give you an account of what's happened since Barber left. I kept books for him."

"Give me a minute," Suffern said.

The door closed. Suffern regarded it blankly. This was going along a little faster than even he had anticipated. It was almost dark now. He would be closeted with the accounts for a couple of hours. There was no chance to leave word with Bent or Hayes, and he knew it would be unwise to trust a messenger with the news he had to give. Besides, things like this went off better if they were not acted.

He rose, put on his coat and went out. The gambler was waiting by the door.

"Get your hat," Suffern told him. "Bring those papers along, I haven't eaten since morning and I'm hungry."

They stepped through the batwing doors together. Suffern was just about to step down onto the sidewalk when he pulled up sharply, but not in time to escape jostling a girl with corn-colored hair who was just passing.

"I beg your pardon," he said gravely, raising his hat.

The girl looked at him carefully, smiled faintly, said, "Certainly," and went her way.

"Who's that?" Suffern asked his gambler.

"Mary Hayes."

The name meant nothing to Suffern for a moment. "Why'd she stare at me like that?"

The gambler chuckled. "Wanted to see what kind of a man it was that beat up her old man's pet deputy, I reckon."

Chapter III

STAGE HOLDUP

SUFFERN got back to the saloon after dark. McCann was waiting for him in the office, and with him were two tall, lanky punchers whom he introduced as Stebbins and Clifton. They were thin-lipped, bleach-eyed and indolent appearing, but Suffern knew them for the best brand of Texas killers that money could buy.

Suffern wasted no time. "I don't know the set-up here. What's the most likely place to hold up a stage."

"Over in the Gunsight," McCann said. "There's plenty of rocks on the slope you can roll down on the road."

"Take me to it," Suffern said. He changed into puncher's clothes and the four of them drifted out the side door.

An hour later, after threading a dark mountain trail, they came to a piece of cleared land. Immediately in front of him, Suffern saw a deep cut in the ridge and the road running through it. The banks were steep, grown with pine and juniper which reached down to the road.

McCann said, "This is Gunsight. Your stage'll be through here in half an hour. It'll be rollin' along slow because this is the top of the grade."

"Uh-huh," Suffern said casually.

Stebbins cocked a leg over the horn of his saddle and spat. "Don't look so good now, huh?"

Suffern said, "Not with only four thousand in the boot."

Clifton laughed unpleasantly, but Suffern ignored it. He dismounted, rolled a smoke and sat down on a rock. The others, with the natural nervousness of beginners at a new task, did not talk much. They watched Suffern, who smoked and yawned and then, to keep himself awake, whistled thinly through his teeth.

Suddenly he stopped whistling, listened a moment, then said, "Here it comes."

"What do you aim to have us do?" McCann asked. "I'm new at this game."

"You get off in the brush and go to sleep," Suffern drawled.

Stebbins cursed in a low voice.

McCann said flatly, "Huh-uh. I'm here to watch you pull it."

"All right. Go up the road and cache yourself behind a boulder."

"You want help to roll a rock down?" Stebbins asked.

"That's beginner's stuff," Suffern said drily. "Don't make no more trouble for the driver than you have to."

"Why?"

"Because the driver don't give a damn if you hold up the stage and take the money. It isn't his. But if you go makin' trouble for him, he's liable to get mad the next time and start shootin'."

"The next time?" Clifton put in. "You goin' to hold it up again?"

"Why not? It carries money, don't it?"

Stebbins looked at Clifton and shook his head. McCann led his horse back into the brush, as did the others. Then they left Suffern and headed up the road.

Suffern rose, rammed his guns down tight in their holsters, then picked his way down the steep, long bank. He stopped by the side of the road beside a tall lodgepole pine that he had noticed. Knocking the small dead limbs away from the low trunk, he swung himself up into the tree.

He waited. He wanted to make this clean, quick, without a gunshot, for he realized that this must be as genuine as the real thing. The driver had not been warned, and Suffern would have to get the drop on him.

IN THE silence, Suffern could hear the laboring of the six horses as they pulled forward, the jolting of the wheels on rock and the creak of harness leather.

When the stage took shape in the darkness, Suffern could see that there was a shotgun guard sitting beside the driver—gun across knee, ready for action.

Now the horses were under. Suffern. Slowly, the stage drew abreast and he braced himself. A glance down told him there was no baggage on the top. Now the driver and guard were under him, and he could have reached down and knocked off the driver's hat. He counted two, his guns drawn, then slid the five feet to the stage

top, landing silently, knees bent, facing the driver and guard.

"Reach for 'em, gents!" he whipped out curtly.

The guard whirled, and found himself staring into the twin barrels of Suffern's guns.

"You, guard! Stay put! . . . You, driver! Rein in and kick your brake on!"

The driver obeyed.

Suffern said to him, "Now take that hombre's greener by the barrel and throw it off in the brush."

Again the driver obeyed. Suffern walked forward, flipped the sixguns from the holsters of the two men. Yanking the door of the stage open, he ordered the passengers out, saying, "This is a stickup, folks. Take it easy and no one'll get hurt."

Two men and two women filed out. Suffern smothered an exclamation of surprise when he saw that one of the passengers was Mary Hayes.

"Lie down on the ground on your faces, all of you," Suffern said crisply. When they had complied, he ordered the driver to his feet.

"Climb up there and throw that boot down," he told him.

In less than fifteen seconds, the boot was on the ground and the driver held the reins again. Suffern commanded the passengers to rise.

"Climb in, folks," he said pleasantly. "I don't want your watches and money."

Mary Hayes was the last to get in. She kept looking at him, even though he was standing clear of the stage.

"Know me, ma'am?" Suffern asked her.

"I'll be able to tell better later," Mary replied gravely.

"I'd hate that," Suffern drawled.

"Then you know me—know where to find me?" Mary asked.

Suffern covered up glibly. "It won't be hard to find out who was on the stage that was held up in the Gunsight, will it?"

"I suppose not," Mary replied slowly. "But don't think I'll be intimidated by these threats. If I think I'm right, I'll give you away. That's a promise."

"You keep still, Miss Mary," the stage driver said sharply.

Mary shrugged and climbed into the stage.

IN another minute, the stage was rolling off. Suffern watched it go, a scowl creasing his forehead. He hadn't counted on the sheriff's daughter being a passenger. She would have to have a remarkable memory to place a man who had jostled her in the street and spoken a few words of apology to her.

He picked up the boot and walked up the slope. McCann, Stebbins and Clifton were waiting for him.

Suffern chucked the boot on the ground at their feet and yawned.

"Well," McCann said slowly, "that was the smoothest piece of work I ever watched. You must be an old hand at this."

"Tolerable," Suffern said.

"Let's open it and see what we got," McCann said.

Suffern stiffened. "Did you say *we*?"

McCann said, "I did."

"Then say it over again, and when you say it next time, say, 'Let's open it up and see what *you* got.'"

For a moment there was dead silence, then McCann shifted his feet.

"We'll take our cut," he said quietly. "We've tolled you into this outfit and we'll split, sixty-forty."

"I'm not tolled in this outfit yet, because the boss thought I couldn't make it," Suffern replied doggedly. "And we won't split sixty-forty. The only split I'll make with this is one hundred-nothing."

"I'd be a little careful," McCann said gently.

"Give the word, boss," Stebbins said.

McCann said something and Stebbins' hand dropped to his gun. Suffern, in the act of turning, saw that hand, and his own streaked down and up. The gun, hip-high, thundered once in the night. Stebbins' hand flew back, he cursed savagely, then drew his arms across his chest and put his other hand to his forearm.

Slowly, Suffern holstered his gun.

"Maybe he didn't hear you," he said to McCann. "Tell him again. Tell him, 'What Suffern says goes.'"

"You deaf?" he drawled softly, and the note of threat did not escape McCann.

"Let it go," McCann said. "The boot's yours."

"I know it," Suffern replied. He wanted to sigh with relief. If he had been over-

ruled, out-bluffed, he would have been licked, and he knew it. As it was, the money was his to return to Sheriff Hayes and its rightful owner.

"Now you can open it up and see what I've got," he said gently.

Chapter IV

CHIP OFF THE LAW-BLOCK

MARY HAYES felt the fearful silence as the stage started again. One of the passengers—a man—said, "I thought he was going to shoot you, miss."

Mary said nothing. When they had made the top of the grade and were a half mile down the other side of the pass, the stage pulled to a stop and the passengers got out again.

Dave Pyott, the driver, came down swearing. "Of all the condemned, foolishness I ever heard, your'n was the foolishness, Mary Hayes!" he began. "Why that hard-case come so close to shootin' you, you're as good as dead right now!"

Mary only smiled and allowed Dave to let off steam. When he was finished, she said, "You're going to change teams at the station below, aren't you, Dave?"

"Sure. Why?"

"You wouldn't miss a horse, would you?"

"I reckon not," Dave said. "Why?"

"I'm riding back to Roaring Fork," Mary informed him.

Again Dave blew up. He wouldn't allow it. Mary was liable to run into that hard-case again. Besides, the six horses here weren't properly broke. But Dave finally cut out the gentlest horse, and with a wave of her hand, Mary was off in the night, headed back toward Roaring Fork.

On her way, she thought over what she was going to do. Certainly, this man who had held up the stage was the same man who had begged her pardon for bumping her that afternoon. Mary was sure she could tell that voice anywhere; it was soft, gentle, a little rumbling, without a trace of bluff or brag in it.

But she wondered what would happen if she were wrong. What if Suffern had been at the saloon the whole evening? She didn't know anything about the man, and she wanted to be fair. She didn't understand why Will Bent had fought with him,

but people told her that Will had shot off his mouth and got what he deserved.

She rode fast, so that she was in town within an hour. Coming in by alleys, she turned her horse loose in the corral behind the feed stable, then began wondering what to do next.

Go to the saloon and see if Suffern was there? No, that was out of the question. But that would be the place he'd come to if he was the one who really did hold up the stage.

Sticking to the alley, she walked slowly, thinking. Behind the War Bonnet a few ponies stood hipshod at the tie-rail. She walked past them until she came to the space between the saloon and the next building. Bulking in the dark, the office was visible. The room was unlighted, which meant Suffern wasn't there. But if he came. . . .

Mary had an idea. She walked down the dark passageway to the office and stood before it. The office, built later than the saloon, had no foundation; it rested on thick joists, and an apron of clapboard covered these joists. By jerking a board loose, she could squirm in between the joists and be able to hear through the thin board floor overhead.

It only took a moment for her to do it. And then she waited, smelling earth and wood-shavings and wondering what kind of bugs and insects were her company.

It was close in there, and she was almost asleep when she heard the booming thump of boots just over her head.

SUDDENLY Suffern's rumbling voice came to her: "You'd better tie that arm up, Stebbins."

A grunt for answer.

"Even a hard-case bleeds, fella. But take your choice."

"Hurry up and get that money hid, Suffern," a voice said, and Mary easily recognized this as McCann's. "We've got other business tonight."

"Like what?" Suffern asked.

"Never mind. Only you won't be the only hombre who knows his business. I'll show you how we work our end."

Suffern said, after a pause, "I dunno. We're liable to have this town lynchin' mad if we pull off another job."

Mary smiled grimly, certain now that she had been right.

"That's my business," McCann said. "Who knows this town best—you or me?"

"You do."

"All right. And who's boss of this outfit?"

"You are," Suffern said drily, and Mary wondered at it.

"Then what I say goes. We'll wake this bunch of mossbacks up so they won't quiet down for a year."

There was a silence.

"All right, here's the plan," McCann said in a low voice, and Mary had to strain to catch his next words. "On the other slope of the mountains, there's a railroad way station at a spur that used to run up to the mines. The mine's gone now, but once in a while a carload or so of cattle are shipped from there. The only man lives there is the agent and I've bought him, so there'll be no trouble about brand inspection. He has four empty cars waiting. We're goin' to deliver them. And, furthermore, we're goin' to take them from close to here. How does that sound?"

"All right," Suffern said. "But I haven't had any sleep since night before last."

McCann laughed a little. "You'll have to get used to that. Have you ever worked cattle?"

"Lots."

"Good. I'll need every man I can get hold of. This is going to be a fast, hard drive. If we start right away, we'll be at the place at one. The stuff should be gathered by now and the boys'll be loose-herding it for us. By daylight, we'll be in the canyon country. That'll leave us a whole day to get over the worst of the high country. Tomorrow night we'll have the stuff in the pens. And then, within half an hour, it'll be on its way to the stockyards."

Suffern said, "You've got it timed close."

"That's the way we'll run things from now on—fast and hard."

There was a movement overhead, and Mary heard the tumbler of the safe lock falling. Certainly she had enough proof against Suffern now. The evidence was locked in the safe, and the arrest of Suffern could wait. Already she could hear the men filing out into the night through

the side door. It would be impossible to get her father, tell him the story and arrest Suffern now, since she didn't know where Suffern and McCann were going. At no time had McCann mentioned whose beef was going to be stolen. The thing to do was to warn her father and get up a posse.

OPENING the door of the sheriff's office, Mary found only Cal Fields there. His feet were cocked up on the corner of the desk and he was deep in a lazy game of solitaire.

He came to his feet with a crash, and a wide grin broke over his lean face as he looked at her grimed face.

"What you been doin', Miss Mary—playin' with mud pies?"

Mary said swiftly, "Where's dad?"

"Gone out?"

"Where's Will?"

"He's gone, too."

"Where?"

"Over the other side of the county. Word come in this evenin' of a shootin' scrape down in the dry country."

Mary sank into a chair.

"What's—the trouble?" Cal asked.

Mary told him in a few words that some rustling was going on even now, and that she knew where the stock would be shipped from. She described it, and Cal nodded. "That would be Chloride, over on the other slope."

"But what'll we do, Cal? We can't let McCann get away with it. If we caught him, it would be the end of all this rustling that has been worrying dad for years now. McCann's the brains behind it all, and now we've got a chance to catch him!"

"And that damn, bull-shouldered hardcase of a Suffern!" Cal said quietly. He stood there a moment, scowling.

"I know four men here I can trust. I'll round 'em up. I'll send a messenger to catch up with your dad and Will. They'll put up at the Circle K tonight. By tomorrow night, they sure ought to be in Chloride. Just don't you worry. You go home and let me handle this."

Mary jumped up, her eyes blazing. "Let you handle it! And leave me home? Not on your life, Cal Fields!"

Cal argued, but Mary argued harder and more effectively. At last Cal capitulated with a shrug. "All right, but I see where I'll have to jump the county as soon as Andy Hayes finds this out," he finished dolefully.

Mary did not hear him. She was strapping on a shell-belt and a pair of sixguns.

Fifteen minutes later, Cal Fields had rounded up his four men. They were middle-aged ranchers, a grim, harried lot who would be certain to fight like wild men to even the score with the rustlers who had been raiding them into poverty. It was decided that it would be useless to try to find out whose herd McCann and Suffern were running off as there was no time to lose.

They headed out west and south of town, riding, in the direction of Chloride.

Chapter V

DEATH FOR CATTLE THIEVES

CHLORIDE was only a way station. It consisted of a sun-blistered depot, a warehouse and stockpens strung along a thread of track that ran the length of a short, narrow valley in the high foothills of the San Tolars.

Mary pulled up beside Cal Fields, who pointed now to the station below. "Four cars waitin'. It holds together so far."

The six of them took the steep trail down into the valley, but it was Cal Fields and Mary who dismounted on the cinder apron outside the station and walked inside while the others waited.

They were greeted by a small, furtive man, wearing a green eyeshade, who glanced up from his magazine.

"What is it?"

Fields palmed up his gun and pointed it casually, steadily at the agent.

"First thing," he drawled pleasantly, "is to come out of there, hands reachin'."

The agent obeyed, and his eyes were suddenly afraid. When he was standing before them, Fields looked him over, then searched him for hideouts. Finding none, he holstered his own gun.

"Is—is this a stickup?" the agent asked.

"We got invited to a little party," Fields said. "A necktie party. You're liable to be the guest of honor, fella."

"What for? What do you mean?"

"Ask McCann. He'll be there—along with you."

When the agent understood, he sat down weakly and, in a small, tired voice, told Fields everything he wanted to know. McCann had bought him, had even given him a substantial cut in the stolen stock that had been shipped from here for a year and a half. The four ranchers were called in and they listened grimly while the agent recited all the brands of the stolen stock he could remember.

Then the six of them planned for the coming of the rustled herd. Since most of the activity would center around the stockpens, it was there that the men would have to hide themselves.

It was certain either McCann or Suffern would come into the station to parley with the agent and make out the waybills. Fields would stay in the station. Two of the ranchers would hole up in the warehouse, close to the pens. Another would take the tool shed, so the avenue of retreat would be closed. The remaining man would cache himself in the brush down the tracks, so that if the rustlers were stampeded into flight, they would have to run the gauntlet of his fire before they could make the valley mouth to the low foothills.

Mary, by vote of all the men, was to stay in the warehouse and guard the horses.

They had not been at their stations an hour when a low whistle came from the station. It was Fields, and it meant that from the station, where he could get a clear view of the valley and the hills, he had caught sight of the approaching herd.

FIELDS said to the agent, "Go out and open them pens, then hightail it back here. Wave to 'em. And don't talk to a man. I'll have my sights on the buckle on your vest strap, so play it cagey."

The agent stepped out. Already Fields could see a half dozen men riding herd on the tired cattle.

McCann and Suffern paused and watched the others work the muley cattle into the pens. There was a lot of cursing, a lot of quick, skilful horsemanship, and a lot of dust.

Then both of them dismounted and

headed for the depot. The agent was standing in the door. Next to him, against the wall, Fields was crouched, and he had a Colt rammed into the agent's back.

"Talk," Fields whispered.

"How many this time?" the agent called to McCann.

"Same as I promised," McCann called back. "About two hundred."

McCann was walking slowly toward the door, his eyes on the ground. Suddenly he paused in midstep, then slowly turned his head toward the warehouse. Then, with an explosive leap, he turned and started to run for the tool shed.

Too late, Fields understood that McCann had seen the tracks of their horses. He shoved the agent out into the yard, just as the rancher in the shed blasted out with the opening shot. Then the men in the warehouse cut loose, and pandemonium broke.

Fields had his guns trained on Suffern. Then, seeing that Suffern's hands were over his head, he swiveled his guns just in time to throw two wild shots at the zig-zagging McCann, who was managing to dodge the shots of the surprised rancher in the tool shed, before he reached the corner of the building and was out of sight.

Fields whirled then and ran for the stockpens, his guns thundering. Two of the mounted rustlers were down. Off down the track, the hidden rancher was raking the milling herd of cattle and their drivers, while from the warehouse a steady racket of gunfire split the air.

Suffern, when he saw Fields ignoring him, hesitated for a moment. And in that moment, he saw the agent dart inside and reappear with a shotgun. Suffern, running toward the station now, whipped out his right gun and fired it twice, and saw the agent pitch back into the room.

Rounding the corner behind the station, Suffern ran the length of the platform. In a glance, he had seen that the rustlers were surrounded, and that their only hope of escape would lie in cutting between the stockpens and the station at its far end.

Just as he reached the end of the platform, he saw a rider hurtle past, lying low on the neck of his horse. Suffern opened up with both guns. He saw the

man roll off into the dust just as a second and third and fourth rider followed.

Suffern whirled—to confront a rifle in the hands of Fields, who had broken a pane in the station window and shot through it.

"Reach for it!" Fields said curtly.

Smiling, Suffern did, aware now that the shooting had ceased and that men were running for the station on the other side.

SUDDENLY a fusillade of shots rang out from the tool shed, and one of the runners pitched on his face. The others speeded their pace in the hurry to make the station.

Fields, rifle in Suffern's back, prodded him into the station where two ranchers were standing breathless, guns in hand.

"What happened?" Fields asked. "Who was that that shot?"

"McCann," one of the ranchers said bitterly. "He's fortied up in the tool shed."

"Which means that Conaghan must be dead," a woman's voice said. Suffern looked behind him, and noticed Mary Hayes, a rifle in her hand. She had been guarding the door he had just come through. She looked at him levelly, contemptuously.

"How many'd we get?" Fields asked.

"I counted six dead—and this hombre," one of the ranchers said, indicating Suffern.

"And you'll wish you was, too," the other rancher said grimly. "Sit down."

Suffern sat down. "Where's Sheriff Hayes?" he asked levelly.

Fields, with his gun still pointed at him, said, "Why?"

"Because I'm a range detective," Suffern replied.

"A range detective," he drawled contemptuously. "Prove it."

"I can't. I left my credentials at the saloon. I was forced into this before I could get hold of Hayes to tell him about it."

Mary Hayes said quietly, "I suppose you were forced into that stage robbery last night, too?"

Suffern smiled slightly. "I had to pull that to get in with McCann. I have the money—"

"In your safe at the War Bonnet," she put in. "I heard you put it there. I heard you admit you robbed the stage. I also

heard you and McCann plan this rustling job."

Suffern had his mouth open to defend himself when Mary Hayes added coldly, "I hate a thief. But I hate a double-crossing thief more. I saw you shoot your own men." She sneered. "You saw which way the fight was going and jumped on the side of the winner, hoping you could carry out your bluff about being a range detective."

Suffern flushed. He knew angry men when he saw them. And these men were not only angry, but were in a mood for deadly revenge.

"I'm not afraid of taking a slug or getting hung for rustling," Suffern said. "I wish you'd talk to Sheriff Hayes before you give me either, though."

Fields snorted. "Stalling."

"Let's give it to him," one of the ranchers said bitterly. "It'll save time, and then we can smoke McCann out of that tool shed."

He raised his gun, cocked it. Fields made no move to stop him.

"Wait a minute!" Mary cut in. The rancher paused. Mary looked over at Suffern, then at Fields.

"Why risk the lives of all of us by trying to take McCann. Let Suffern do it. He claims to be a range detective—on our side. All he's done so far is shoot men who believed him to be on their side. Give him a gun. Let him take McCann."

For a moment the men looked at each other.

"Why not?" Fields drawled coldly. "If he tries to get away, we'll drill him in the back. If he joins McCann there in the tool shed, we'll dynamite 'em both out of it."

Suffern looked at each of them, then at the girl. "All right," he said gravely. "I don't blame you a bit. But I'll have to ask a favor of you."

"What is it?" Mary asked.

"If I take McCann, will you hand me over to Sheriff Hayes—unshot and unhung?"

Mary said, "We won't have to."

"But if I come through, will you?"

They hesitated. Finally Mary said, "I

don't believe in a cottonwood jury. I never have, even for men like you. But I have only one vote. I'll vote to turn you over to dad—and in good health."

The others reluctantly agreed.

Chapter VI

FOREVER AND EVER

SUFFERN stood up and walked to the door. Off to his right, facing the end of the station and about a hundred feet away, was the tool shed. And in that tool shed was McCann. It never entered his head that he couldn't take McCann; he only wondered just how to do it.

Musing, his gaze fell on the body of a man whom McCann had cut down on. The man was moaning.

Suffern said, "He's alive."

Fields looked at the wounded man, then at the tool shed, then at Suffern. "It doesn't do him a hell of a lot of good, does it? Not when he knows we can't reach him."

Suffern said nothing. He braced himself, then exploded out of the doorway and ran for the man. He reached him, just as McCann shot from the shed. The slug kicked off Suffern's hat as he stooped to pick the man up. Erect, he started back, with the wounded man over his shoulder, running hard. . . . A second shot rang out, and a third, and still he was running.

He made the doorway then. Losing his balance, he pitched headlong on the floor; the wounded man falling on him. He rose, the others eyeing him silently, and looked down at the wounded man.

Mary was the first to act. She knelt by the wounded man and started to cut away the leg of his levis, but she looked up at Suffern, and in her eyes was a light of quiet admiration.

"That took courage," she said quietly. "I didn't know a rat had it."

Suffern was about to speak, but shrugged and turned to Fields. "Give me two guns—all six chambers loaded."

The first step drew a shot from McCann.

And then Suffern opened up. He could see the knot hole through which McCann had shot, and he aimed for it as best he could, ducking, weaving, but always running doggedly for the shed.

Something slammed into his leg, and he almost tripped, but caught himself and went on. He could see the quick orange flare of McCann's gun, could hear the singing of the slugs, but there was a cold smile on his face as he ran.

Twenty feet from the shed, McCann's guns were silent. Suffern fired one last shot, tried again, heard the click of the hammer on the empty chamber, then threw his gun at the knot hole and ran straight for the door.

He dived into it, shoulder down, and heard the crash as the wood gave. He pitched forward into the shed on top of the door. And even as he felt himself hit the floor, he rolled over, came up on one knee, and shot twice—his last two shells—at a dark bulk on the floor. The body only barely stirred with the impact of the slugs.

Slowly, unsteadily, he struggled to his feet and walked over to McCann. Turning him over, Suffern saw that one of his slugs had caught him full in the face, just to one side of the nose. The defending rancher was dead in the corner, where McCann had shot him.

DRIPPING his guns, Suffern walked unsteadily to the door.

He continued to walk across that piece of ground, which a minute before had been a hell of lead and death. His eyes were getting hard to focus. There were two horses there by the cinder apron and what looked like a crowd of people watching him.

Suddenly his eyes did come into focus, and he saw Sheriff Hayes running toward him.

"Hello, Sheriff," he said quietly, and held out his hand.

He didn't know why that hand should have gathered a handful of cinders, but it did. And he knew, just before things went a star-spangled black in front of his eyes, that he had fallen.

Later, on the bench in the station, he wakened to find Mary kneeling beside him. Beyond her were Fields, the ranchers, Sheriff Hayes and Will Bent.

Hayes said slowly, "I thought these hard-headed rannies had killed you, son."

Suffern smiled.

Hayes went on: "I came foggin' in here just in time to see you dive into that tool shed. Why in the name of—"

Mary interrupted him. "Dad, don't bawl them out. It was my idea." She turned to Suffern. "Will you ever forgive me? Dad has told me you really are a range detective, and that you weren't working with McCann."

"I had to hold up that stage to get in with McCann," Suffern replied slowly. "I made one mistake. I didn't have any way of communicating with the sheriff to let him know what to expect. I sort of had to run this on a high lonesome—until you folks come along."

"And almost got you killed," Fields said dejectedly.

"Forget it," Suffern said, holding out his hand. Fields took it.

Mary suddenly began to cry. The men stood around awkwardly, waiting for her to stop, but she could not.

Finally Will Bent said, "She don't like a crowd, you danged fools. Come away."

When they were gone out, Mary stopped her sobbing.

Suffern looked at her curiously. "How did your dad and Bent get here?"

"That—that call to the other s-s-side of the county w-w-was a ruse to toll them out of town." Mary sobbed, and added, "Why—why can't I s-s-stop this?"

"But why are you crying?" Suffern asked gently.

She looked up at him, her eyes wet, but somehow she managed to smile. "Did you ever s-s-send someone you loved to their d-d-death and then, when they were on their way, realize that you loved them?"

Suffern said huskily, "No. But did you ever point a gun at someone—someone you thought more of than anybody you'd ever seen—and threaten to shoot her if she gave you away?"

Mary laughed a little. "No, I never did. Did you?"

"Yes." And he added gently, "Sinners should suffer together, shouldn't they?"

"I think so," Mary said in a low voice.

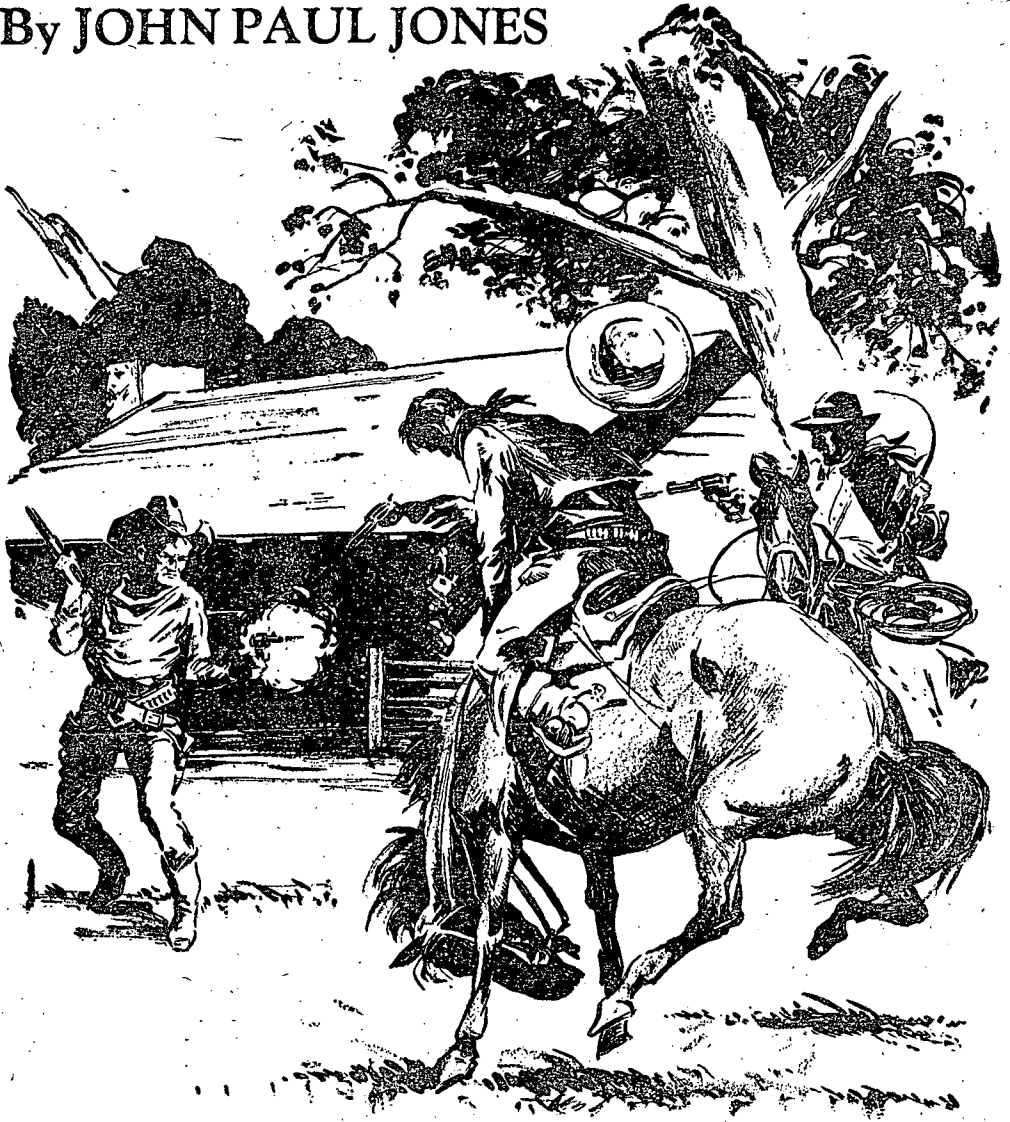
"Forever and ever?"

"Forever and ever," Mary said quietly.

THE END

RANGERS RIDE ALONE

By JOHN PAUL JONES



A glorious Texas tradition is that epic line: "One riot; one Ranger!" . . . True to its history-making example, sawed-off Pewee Biggers invaded the Big Bend's inviolate robbers' roost—where ten desperate renegades were ready to prove that one gun could hold off an army!

IN THE semi-darkness of the ranch livingroom, one man sat slumped forward in his chair; the other paced restlessly to and fro. Both were old men. The face of the man in the chair was weather-beaten, seamed by lines that were

now set in grim hardness. He had a tobacco-stained, droopy mustache and hard, blue eyes. Upon his unbuttoned vest, a star glinted. The other man was tall, white-haired. He wore a white shirt, a flowing black tie. His eyes were shadow-

ed by bushy, black brows. And in those eyes, there was anguish, fear.

Suddenly the pacing man halted, whirled to face the one in the chair.

"My God, why doesn't he get here, Sheriff?"

"He's due any minute now, Judge."

The judge laughed with bitter anguish.

"And what is there that he can do? What can anyone do except agree to Madley's terms?" he demanded harshly.

"Calm yoresef, Judge. If the wuss comes to the wuss. . . ." The old sheriff paused, shifted uneasily in his chair. Then, with a harsh grimace, he completed: "We'll turn that hombre loose!"

The judge came across the floor, stood above the old sheriff. In the dusk they looked into each other's eyes.

"Thirty years I've sat upon the bench. During all of those years I have performed my duty—no matter whom it hurt. Sheriff, I—I. . . ." Something akin to a sob choked off his words.

"I won't like it no better than you, Judge," growled the sheriff. "That damn murderin' thief oughta hang, but when he drops through the trap what's goin' to happen to Ann? I might get a posse and—"

"No!" cried the judge. "A posse couldn't take Madley out of that country. And even if they did. . . ." Again his voice failed.

The old sheriff nodded.

"Exactly, Judge. Even if we did get Madley, we'd be too late to help Ann. I'm gettin' too old, Judge, I reck'n, to be sheriff. Twenty year ago. . . No, I don't know as it'd made any difference. This is a job for a Ranger."

"Why doesn't he get here!" cried the judge, and began his pacing again. "Every minute of delay. . . God, I hate to think of what may happen to Ann!"

Both men tensed suddenly, their eyes strained upon the doorway.

THE jingle of spurs and the tramp of boots sounded upon the veranda. A small figure stepped into the open doorway, halted there, silhouetted against the gray darkness.

"Judge Comerford?" he said to the shadowy figures within the room.

"Yes, I am Judge Comerford. But I am busy now. If you want to see me about some legal matter, come to my office in the morning."

The small figure chuckled.

"When the sheriff telephoned, his voice sounded like there wasn't nothin' more important than you seein' me. He said there was a job for a Ranger. I'm the Ranger. What's the job?"

The sheriff came to his feet, crossed the room in two swift strides, with his hand outstretched.

"Judge, it's Pewee Biggers! The littlest, fastest, straightest-shootin' hombre thet ever forked bowed-laigs across a saddle! Yuh little son-of-a-gun! I'm shore glad it was you that come." And the sheriff pumped the Ranger's hand exuberantly.

"Shucks, Sheriff!" The little Ranger chuckled, took the judge's outstretched hand. "Yo're plumb overwhelmin' my modesty." Then his voice became crisp, businesslike. "Let's hear the story, gents."

The judge lit a lamp, set it upon the table. In its yellow rays, he studied the small figure of Pewee Biggers. It was obvious from his expression that he was disappointed.

The Ranger was not an imposing figure as he stood there in the yellow lamplight, with his hands resting upon his hips, above the ivory butts of tied-down .45's. Those guns appeared incongruous upon this small, inoffensive appearing man. He had removed his broad-brimmed Stetson. His hair was thin and reddish; his brows were turned upwards at the corners, which lent his mild, blue eyes an expression of perpetual astonishment. He had a thin, wispy mustache, a crooked nose and a wrinkled face that was the color of very old saddle leather. His gray flannel shirt was open at the throat; his black corduroy breeches were tucked into the tops of sloppy boots. It was absurd, thought the judge, to expect this weazened little man to be of any aid.

The sheriff and judge sat down, waved the Ranger to a chair, but he shook his head, remained standing at the head of the table. His mild eyes fixed upon the sheriff.

"What's the trouble, Sheriff?"

It was the judge who replied. Briefly,

eliminating all but essential details, he related the story Ike Burrows, a member of Madley's crew of Big Bend outlaws, had been captured, tried for murder and sentenced to hang. He was in jail now, waiting for the execution of the sentence. Yesterday Ann Comerford, the judge's granddaughter, had ridden out alone. When she did not return at nightfall, searching parties were sent to look for her. She had not been found. This morning a ragged peon had delivered a letter to the judge.

The judge paused in his recital, took a folded sheet of paper from his pocket and passed it to the Ranger, who took it, leaned nearer the light to read:

Dear Judge:

Ike Burrows is one of my men. Every man in the outfit has my pledged word that in the event of their arrest, every effort will be made to free them. I never break my word. Ike is to be hanged Saturday.

I have another man in my outfit, Pedro Onate, who believes your granddaughter to be the most desirable woman he has ever seen. Pedro is a brute. I leave to your imagination what might happen to a girl as beautiful as your granddaughter should he be given the opportunity to possess her.

Your granddaughter is now here in my care. I pledge my word that no harm shall come to her, that she shall be permitted to leave here immediately upon the arrival of Ike Burrows. It is for you to decide. If Burrows is not released, I shall give your granddaughter to Pedro Onate. I pledge my word to carry out the above.

Madley.

THE little Ranger's eyes were no longer mild. Into them had come little flecks of blue fire as cold as the sun on Arctic ice. He folded the letter, returned it.

"Is this feller's word good? Will he return the girl like he says?"

The judge and sheriff nodded.

"He's a murderin' sidewinder, Pewee. And he's got the Border's wust cutthroats in his outfit. But he'll keep his word."

The little Ranger nodded soberly.

"So the job yuh want done is for me to bring Burrows back to be hung, huh?"

"Burrows is in jail now," said the sheriff. "We was figurin' that mebbe. . . Oh, hell!" he broke off wearily. "I guess I was excited when I called for a Ranger. There ain't nothin' we can do but turn that damn murderin' hellion loose."

Pewee seemed surprised. "Why, shore! Yuh can't take a chance at tryin' to get the girl away from them hombres. They'd harm her before you could get to them. Turn Burrows loose."

The judge's face was drawn, haggard. There was an unutterable anguish in his eyes.

"You understand what it will mean? If we turn Burrows loose, Madley will use the same method to free others of his gang if they are captured. I can't bear to think of Ann among those . . . God, I can't let any harm come to her! But to turn a murderer loose. . . ."

"When you get the girl back," said Pewee, "Burrows can be brought in an' hanged all reg'lar."

The sheriff laughed with bitter mirth.

"A army or a dozen posses couldn't bring him back, Pewee. They're holed up in a canyon clost to the Border. If they was hard pressed, they could jump across the river. To reach that robbers' roost, yuh have to ride through a canyon that ain't more'n ten feet wide in spots. One hombre with a rifle could hold a army off."

"I reckon they post a sentinel on the trail?" said the little Ranger thoughtfully.

The sheriff nodded.

"Yeah. No man livin' could get in an' out of there less'n Madley wanted him to. There's ten of them in the outfit."

"I'll take a look at this Burrows hombre," said Pewee. "I don't want him to see me, but I want to get a good enough look at him so's I'll be able to bring in the right man for the hangin'."

"My God, Pewee!" cried the sheriff. "A Ranger wouldn't last no longer than fresh meat in a desert sun if he got into that place."

"Now, Sheriff," said the Ranger mildly, "you call me up an' say there's a job for a Ranger over here. I ride twenty miles to get here. I've took the job. That job is to bring this Burrows hombre back to get hung. I believe yuh said he was to be hung Saturday. . . . Well, today's Tuesday. I reckon the girl will be back tomorrow, Wednesday. That's goin' to sorta crowd me for time, but I reckon you'll have your gallows' bait in time. Now, let's do a little figurin'."

THE following evening, astride a stallion as black as midnight, Pewee rode southward. A blood-red sun melted into the horizon beyond the spires of a distant mountain range, and night came.

Eerie shadow-shapes loomed like sinister guardians over that land of arid mesas and deep, rocky canyons. Only the measured *clink-clink* of steel-shod hoofs against the stone broke the silence of the night as the black stallion moved with cautious tread along the narrow, tortuous trail.

Pewee was slouched down in the saddle, his hands resting upon hips above the ivory-handled guns. His head lolled upon his chest as though he slept. But he did not sleep. Beneath the brim of the gray Stetson, his eyes were wary—alert for the faintest movement in the darkness.

The trail dipped downward suddenly. The black stallion stumbled, sent spraying geysers of pebbles rolling down the trail. The Ranger jerked up on the reins; the black horse regained his footing. They reached the bottom of the trail, were upon the level again. This time the steel-shod hoofs struck fire from the stone floor of the canyon which they had entered. It was as dark as a midnight grave. No starlight filtered into it.

Pewee was erect in the saddle now, his senses alert. His sleeping pose was no longer necessary. And then, from the trail-side, came a sudden command:

"Grab a handful of stars, pilgrim!"

In the pitch darkness, neither man could see the other. But Pewee was certain that the guard would be protected behind some cover. His hands tightened about the ivory-handled guns. He was not surprised by the challenge. He had been expecting it. He was playing a dangerous game and knew it; but he was doing a Ranger's job, and personal danger did not matter.

"Yuh lost, pilgrim?" said the voice.

"I was sorta beginnin' to think so," said Pewee. "But I reckon I'm headed in the right direction."

"Yeah? An' what direction is that?"

"Madley's hangout."

"Yuh got a invitation from Madley?"

"Nope. Orders from the Cap'n. He's got a idee that you fellers is gettin' just a little too hot down here an' need coolin' off. I'm the cooler."

The man's voice was puzzled: "I don't savvy your lingo, pilgrim. Who are yuh? An' what do yuh want?"

"I'm a Ranger an' I want a feller named Burrows who's got a date to do a air-dance Saturday." Pewee's tone was conversational, but his nerves were tensed.

There was a moment of stunned silence. Then, with a shocked incredulity, the man's voice exploded: "Yo're *what*?"

"A Ranger," repeated the little man genially. But there was no geniality in the blue eyes, which had lost their mildness and were now hard crescents of cold light between narrowed lids.

There was a swift-drawn gasp of incredulity from the darkness. "By the brass doors of hell, pilgrim, yo're a liar—or a fool!"

WITH slow, cautious movements, Pewee was lowering himself to the ground. His feet touched the hard rock. With noiseless swiftness, he removed his boots. He straightened up, spoke:

"Neither one, hombre. Yo're squatted behind a boulder. But I got cat eyes. You make a move, an' I'll salivate yuh!"

The other man laughed ironically. There was the rasp of a match across rough stone. A small circle of dim yellow luminance showed against the darkness.

"Yo're right, Ranger. I'm behind a boulder. Soon's I get this lantern lit, I'll be able to see you 'thout havin' cat eyes. If you was to get foolish an' try a shot, I'll salivate yuh!"

Pewee was already acting. He let his boots lie where he had removed them. With swift, silent movement, he slithered through the darkness. Sharp, jagged stones were painful against his feet. He winced with every forward step. But he was against the canyon wall now. The yellow luminance was less than ten feet ahead of him. Slowly he crept forward. He saw the lantern being slowly raised to the top of the boulder.

"All right, Ranger!" called the man. "Unload and walk this way with your hands up."

Pewee was less than three feet from the man's coign now. There was a crack between the canyon wall and the boulder, through which he could see the man's

crouching figure. Quickly Pewee moved against that crack.

The man gave a startled jerk as a gun-hammer clicked back.

Then came the grim command: "Just hold it, hombre! Up with your hands!"

A moment, the man hesitated. He had a rifle, its barrel thrust through an opening that covered the trail. He realized the folly of making an effort to swing that rifle. The Ranger's gun was less than three feet from him. He raised his hands.

"Yo're a damn fool, Ranger!" he snarled. "This won't get yuh nothin' but a bellyful of lead."

"Move out into the trail—an' keep them hands up!" snapped the Ranger.

The man obeyed. He was standing directly under the lantern light. He was a husky brute of a man with scarred face and black eyes as venomous as a snake's. As the Ranger came into the light, the man gave a start, stared in disbelief.

"You, a Ranger!" Then he laughed in scorn. "Hell, it'd take three of you tuh make a man!"

"Uh-huh," said Pewee genially. "Here's the other two." And he made a slight motion with the two ivory-handled guns. "An' now, hombre, climb onto that hoss."

The little Ranger had sidled around and now stood at the head of the black stallion, talking softly. The man stared, puzzled. Then he laughed.

"Hell, you figgerin' on arrestin' me? I won't be in jail twenty-four hours! Madley don't let his men stay in jail. An' there'll be a couple of the boys along here in a little while. My relief sentry. When they find me gone—"

"Get on the hoss!" snapped the little Ranger.

Laughing scornfully, the man obeyed. The black stallion stiffened, his velvety coat rippling with little tremors as the man got into the saddle. Pewee spoke softly and the horse quieted.

Pewee quickly pulled his boots back on, his eyes never leaving the face of the man in the saddle. Then, from the pommel, he removed a lariat. The man laughed as he was being bound, and offered no resistance.

"Madley is goin' to be pretty sore about this," he said. "Pilgrim, yo're loadin' a big

load of grief on them small shoulders of your'n!"

Pewee said nothing. He pinioned the man's arms to his sides; tied them with quick, dexterous security. Then he tied the man's feet together beneath the horse's belly. The man protested, but the Ranger made no retort. His job complete, Pewee stood back, squinted at his captive and grinned.

"Reckon you'll stay there until you reach the sheriff," he said with a chuckle.

He turned the black stallion in the trail, spoke softly and the big horse nuzzled him. Then, with a sharp slap, he sent the big black back along the trail.

He got the lantern, blew it out and sat down. He could hear the clatter of hoofs echoing through the canyon. He grinned. So far, things were working his way. Six miles back along the trail, the sheriff and a small posse waited. The black stallion would carry his burden safely there. The sheriff had his orders.

THE hoofbeats died away. Pewee shot into the air, emptying his gun. Without reloading it, he thrust it back into its holster. Removing the gunbelt that held the loaded gun about his waist, he put the gun into his boot, pulled his trouser leg down over it and hid the gunbelt in the rocks. He heard the clatter of hoofs coming from down the canyon.

In the darkness, Pewee's face drew into grim lines. The game began in earnest now. He had agreed with the sheriff that an armed invasion of the outlaws' stronghold would be impossible. An expert rifleman, hidden among the rocks, could hold off a hundred invaders. There had been but one thing to do: get into that stronghold through strategy. His plans had depended upon there being a sentinel posted. After he got into the stronghold . . . He shrugged, smiled grimly.

Of a sudden, the hoofbeats had ceased. He realized that the riders, suspecting a trap, had dismounted and were now converging upon him afoot. He remained motionless a moment longer, then cried out:

"Don't you fellers shoot! I'm waitin' here for yuh! I'll light the lantern soon's I can find it."

There was a moment of silence, then

from twenty feet away a startled voice said: "Who the hell are you—an' where's Jake?"

"If Jake was that damn skunk—"

"Light that lantern!"

Pewee lit the lantern, held it aloft.

"Walk this way!" commanded the voice.

"Anyone with yuh?" Then, following a stream of oaths: "Where's Jake?"

Advancing toward the unseen man, Pewee simulated anger. "Took my hoss an' money!" he raved, and followed it by a stream of profanity.

A figure bulked in the darkness ahead. Others were moving in toward the trail. Pewee still held the lantern aloft. Its rays picked out the burly form of a hard-visaged man who held a leveled gun.

"Who are yuh? What're yuh doin' here? An' what do yuh mean that Jake rode off? Speak fast, hombre!" There was grim menace in the harsh voice.

Pewee maintained his pose of anger. "Three days ago me an' two other fellers robbed a bank. My pards got salivated, but I got away with the swag. I've heared about Madley an' I figured this'd be a safe place to hole-up until things cooled off. This feller you called Jake stopped me. When I told him what I had, he sticks a gun on me, takes me off'n my hoss an' rides off hell-bent on my hoss with the swag. I empty my gun after him, but . . ."

The man whirled.

"You—Pedro, Gus, Bart! Hit the trail an' bring Jake back! You, Ike, stick here! I'll take this seed-wart to Madley. Get movin'!"

There was hurried movement. Spurred boots ran over the stone floor. Horses pranced. Men cursed. Then the three who had been ordered in pursuit dashed away.

"Take the lantern, Ike. An' don't go to sleep. This may be a trap. If it is . . ."

Pewee's pulse beat faster when he got a good look at the man who took the lantern. It was Ike Burrows! He would be here alone, on guard. If Pewee could allay Madley's suspicions and get back here, the capture of Ike would be easy. But he did not discount the probability that Madley's suspicion would be difficult to allay.

Pewee's lips set into tight lines. The odds were strong against him once he got into the outlaw lair. The sheriff had said that there

were ten in the gang. Granted that the figure was accurate, subtracting Jake and the three who were in pursuit of him and Ike Burrows, on guard, there would still be five against one.

"All right, hombre!" snapped the man, as soon as Ike had taken up his sentry position. "We'll see the Chief. My name is Sim. Let's have your gun."

PEWEE handed over the empty gun. He was thinking swiftly. Why not take a chance at overpowering Sim and Ike now? But the leveled gun in Sim's hand dissuaded him. He could not hope to get the hidden gun from his boot without Sim being warned. It was obvious that Sim was suspicious.

"Just keep goin' straight ahead," said Sim. "You can't get off the trail. It's less than ten feet wide and walled in by a hundred feet of straight up-and-down rock. You'll find," he said grimly, "that it's a lot easier to get in than out! An' if you've got any funny idees, it's a bad time to try them. I'm right behind you with a gun—an' my trigger finger is sorta nervous."

Pewee chuckled as he started off along the trail.

"Yo're makin' me think that you believe I might be a lawman," he protested.

"Mebby yuh are," said Sim. "We had a couple who got in here. They didn't get out!" he added with a grim laugh.

The gun in his boot-leg made walking over the rough trail painful, but Pewee bore the pain gratefully. With a gun, he had a chance.

The trail made a sharp turn, bent downward at a sharp angle. Far ahead, Pewee could see yellow squares of light coming from the unshaded windows of a large shack. The trail opened into a large oval bowl that was bounded upon all sides by unscalable walls of rock. A full moon was just rising in the northeastern sky, its pale luminance casting an eerie light into the bowl.

"Head for that shack with the lights," said Sim. "The Chief will be there."

They had gone less than a dozen steps when a figure loomed up in the shadows, challenged them sharply.

"What's up?" he called. "Where's the rest of the boys? An' who's this yuh got?"

"You'll hear about it later," said Sim. "Where's the Chief?"

"In the office."

Pewee made a mental note of where the man was posted. Were there others stationed at different points, or were they with Madley? He trudged on toward the shack.

The door was open. He stepped onto the threshold, Sim close behind him.

A MAN was seated behind a rough plank table. He had a map outspread before him. He looked up, saw Pewee and Sim. He expressed no surprise.

"Well?" he said to Sim.

That outward appearance of calm did not deceive Pewee. He had not missed the swift, startled expression that had flitted through those hard, greenish eyes deeply embrasured beneath dark, shaggy brows. This unemotional calmness was a pose. Swiftly Pewee appraised that deeply lined, cruel face with its predatory nose, the thin lips. Madley was not a man to be easily fooled, decided Pewee.

"Picked this hombre up on the trail, Chief," said Sim. "He says he's a bank robber."

The greenish eyes became mere slits between narrowed lids as they surveyed the small, meek appearing little Ranger.

"Bank robber!" boomed a large, red-bearded man, who stepped swiftly through the doorway, stopping short and staring at the diminutive figure. "A bank robber!" He broke into a guffaw of delighted amusement. "Why, this little seed-wart ain't high enough from the ground to keep his britches from draggin'! Him a bank robber!" The red-bearded man laughed again.

"Does seem sorta ridiculous, don't it?" agreed Pewee, with a grin. "But Al Jennings warn't no giant."

Madley's eyes were still narrowed upon Pewee. Now a faint, ironic smile twitched at his thin lips as he looked at the bearded man.

"Yo're rated pretty fast with a gun, ain't yuh, Red?" he said softly.

Red stared, a little puzzled. Then he nodded.

"The fastest along the Border!" he replied. "Why?"

"I was just wonderin'," said Madley

thoughtfully, "if what I heard in El Paso was right. A feller pointed a hombre out to me" He broke off sharply, his narrowed eyes again upon Pewee. "Let's hear your story, partner!"

For an instant, Pewee's body had stiffened. What had Madley meant? No expression of his trepidation showed in his face as he related the story he had told Sim.

Madley sat straight and expressionless, listening. When Pewee had completed, he was looking at Red, an ironic smile upon his lips.

"Think yo're faster'n this pilgrim, Red?"

Red stared a moment, then broke into a bellow of laughter.

"That little hop-toad! Hell, Chief—"

"Down in El Paso," interrupted Madley, "they told me that the fastest-shootin' hombre in the Southwest was a two-gun Ranger named Pewee Biggers. That's him, Red!"

Red and Sim stared, incredulous. Red looked back at Madley, grinned.

"Yo're jokin,' Chief. Why, hell! This here little feller is as harmless—"

"As a rattler," completed Madley dryly. "Yo're neck-deep in his trap. That's how this hombre made his reputation. He looks so damn harmless that fellers get careless. But we're goin' to see just how fast he is. Still claim yo're a bank robber?" he demanded of Pewee.

The little Ranger shrugged. It would do no good to deny his identity. Madley knew him. This was something Pewee had not expected.

"I'm a Ranger," he admitted, and added, a little wryly: "an' a fool. Crowded my luck a little too far."

"Too damn far," agreed Madley. "You ain't got a chance of gettin' out of here. I s'pose you conked Jake an' hid him an' then sent your hoss back along the trail?"

Pewee accepted that explanation and nodded.

"Well, I'll be damned!" ejaculated Sim, staring at Pewee in disbelief. "Pilgrim, did yuh figger on comin' in here an' takin' our outfit lone-handed?"

Madley laughed. "We'll send his ears back to his captain so's it'll be known he got here."

Red's small, glittery eyes were studying Pewee with thoughtful speculation.

"So yo're the Pewee Biggers that's the fastest gun-slinger north of the Border, eh?"

"An' south of it," said Pewee genially.

The little Ranger was up against an almost unbeatable game, and he knew it. Escape seemed hopeless. He knew that he would not be permitted to leave alive. He knew that killing Red in a gun-fight would not aid his own situation. Yet it would reduce the five to four.

MADLEY rose, his lips still quirked in a sardonic smile.

"Where's his gun, Sim?"

Sim handed over Pewee's empty gun. Madley twirled the cylinder, ejected the five discharged shells. He took a cartridge from his own gunbelt, slipped it into Pewee's gun.

"We'll go outside," he said. "The moon's high enough for a couple of good gun-slingers to work in. Willin', Red?"

"Hell," said Red, "it's murder!"

"That orter suit you just right," said Pewee. Then, looking at Madley, "Yo're puttin' just one shell in my gun?"

"Yuh won't live long enough to use more," said Madley.

With Madley in the lead, Sim bringing up the rear with Pewee, they walked from the shack and started across the level stone floor of the huge bowl. The moon was high enough to fill the bowl with a bright, eerie light.

"You'll stand fifty paces apart, with your arms folded across your chests," said Madley. "I'll count three. On the third count, go for your guns . . . Give the seed-wart his gun, Sim."

Sim handed Pewee the gunbelt with its holstered gun.

"There's one thing I'd like to ask," said Pewee. "A long time ago there was a feller-said I'd die with my boots on. I got a wish to sorta fool him."

Madley stared at the little Ranger with a thoughtful frown.

"Yuh got nerve," he admitted.

Pewee's swiftly roving eyes had taken in a ridge of stone less than a dozen feet to his right. He moved toward it. Less than three feet from it, he turned.

"Soon's I get off my boots—"

"I reckon you'll leave them on, hombre,"

interrupted Madley, and there was a mocking note in his voice. "I've got a gun leveled on you. I watched yuh walk over there. There's one good reason why yuh limp on that right laig. Yuh can leave the gun in your boot, right where it is!"

Pewee muttered an oath of chagrin. He'd certainly blundered in every move tonight. He saw Red standing fifty paces away, arms folded across his chest, his body half-crouched. Madley and Sim stood close together, their guns leveled. Far across the bowl, Pewee saw a bobbing lantern coming toward them. That would be the fifth member of the gang. The fourth was probably back there where he had challenged Sim as he and Pewee entered the lair. Pewee flicked another glance at the ridge of rock, inched closer to it.

"All right," he said calmly. "I'm ready. Yo're a shrewd hombre, Madley." He folded his arms across his chest.

Madley began to count:

"One . . . Two . . . Th—!"

PEWEE flung himself sidewise and down. He heard the crash of Red's gun, felt the bullet tug through his sleeve. Then there came the roar of other guns. Madley and Sim had opened fire. Their bullets struck against the crown of the stone ridge, sprayed fragments into Pewee's face as he made desperate haste to free the gun from his boot.

"Circle him!" cried Madley. "Get around to the rear of him, Red!"

Pewee lay face down, flat upon the stone floor. For the moment, their shots could not reach him. But once Red got to the rear, he would no longer be protected by the stone bulwark. A desperate tug jerked the gun free. The shots had ceased.

Pewee thought swiftly. As it stood, he had, at the most, gained a momentary respite. Any chance that he might have lay in sudden, unexpected action.

He heard running footsteps and knew that it was the other two men coming up. He heard a voice calling to Madley. Pewee tensed his body. Then, with a sudden lunge, he leaped up, hurtled the stone ridge and dashed toward Madley and Sim in a zig-zag run. They were half-turned from him, their eyes farther along the ridge.

Pewee's first shot caught Sim in the shoulder, sent him whirling backward, his gun clattering upon the stone floor. Sim's body prevented Madley from getting a shot at the little Ranger, who came on, swift as an enraged leopard, his small figure bent low, zig-zagging as he ran.

Pewee could not afford to waste a shot. His cartridges were limited. He was almost upon Madley as the latter's gun exploded. Pewee felt the swift slither of an icy streak across his shoulder as the bullet sliced through the flesh.

Pewee's gun crashed again, and Madley's left leg buckled. The outlaw leader crashed to the ground, his gun dropping from nerveless fingers. Pewee hurled himself forward and lit astride the fallen man. He heard running feet and the voice of Red and others.

His gun pressed against Madley's breast. He rasped harshly: "I'll drill you if they come another step, Madley. Call them off." He rolled upon the ground behind Madley.

Madley cursed. "Hold it, boys!"

But Red, plunging toward them across the ground, snarled an oath: "Hold it, hell!" he bellowed. "I'm goin' to blow that damn . . ." He never completed the sentence. Pewee's shot smashed into him, and he went down.

The other two men had stopped short.

"Drop them guns and keep comin'—with your hands high!" Pewee ordered. He emphasized his command with a shot that sprayed a small geyser of dust from the ground beside them.

— Madley was cursing in a mad rage. Sim was on the ground, groaning. The two men came on, hands up.

"You'll never get out of here alive!" gritted Madley.

Pewee said nothing until the two men were up to them. He ordered one of them to aid Sim, the other Madley, to the shack. He was grateful that Madley didn't know just how badly Pewee was injured. He could feel the sticky blood spreading from his wound. If he were to cave in now . . .

Back in the shack, he closed the door, sat down against it, with his gun leveled. He forced the two uninjured men to bind up the wounds of Sim and Madley. This completed, he had one of the men tie his companion securely.

"Now," said Pewee, "me'n you'll go to the corral and get hosses. One false move, hombre, an' I salivate you! I ain't in no humor for more excitement."

THE man he had chosen was a weazened, bald-headed and disreputable looking hombre; and he was thoroughly frightened. They went to the corral, got three horses. Pewee mounted one, ordered the man to lead the other two to the shack.

Twenty minutes later, with Madley tied in the saddle, his hands bound to the horn, Pewee headed for the trail. He had left the bald-headed man tied up in the shack with the others.

"I'm not goin' to talk, Madley," said Pewee grimly. "One crooked move, an' I salivate you! When we reach Ike, you'll tell him to light the lantern . . . That's all!"

Madley was in pain, but he cursed.

"Yuh can't get away with it, Ranger! Them boys who went after Jake, they'll see it was a trap, an' they'll be comin' back along the trail damn quick!"

Pewee realized that. There was a chance that the sheriff and his posse had disobeyed orders. Pewee had instructed them to wait only until the black stallion brought out the sentry. But disaster was even closer. The little Ranger had fixed up his wound as best he could, but it was giving him excruciating pain, and he was losing blood. He had to work fast.

As Pewee and Madley, riding abreast, approached the point where Ike would be, Pewee saw that Ike was standing in the trail, waiting. Pewee, alert as he was, did not expect what happened. They had almost reached Ike when a voice rapped a command:

"Lift 'em high, hombre!"

The voice was not Ike's. But in that brief moment, the Ranger saw that Ike held a gun.

Pewee flung himself suddenly sidewise, dropped to the ground. A gun crashed, and the Ranger saw the lance of flame as it leaped from a point less than a dozen feet away. Pewee fired at that flash and heard a yowl of enraged pain.

Then Ike was shooting. Pewee felt a slug tear another slice across his flesh. He could hear Madley bellowing to Ike and the other man. Ike fired again. The bullet

missed by less than an inch. Pewee felt suddenly very weak. Things began to fade from his consciousness. Even with the moonlight, the night seemed to grow suddenly black. Another shot from Ike. Pewee saw the flash, felt the shock of the bullet as it slammed into his leg. His own gun was heavy—too heavy to raise. It seemed as if some great magnet held down his hand

Ike was coming toward him, firing. With one last great effort, Pewee got his gun up. It roared . . . Roared again, and that second recoil tore the gun from his weak fingers. He felt himself fading into darkness. He heard the pound of hoofs. A bitter smile tugged at his lips. The other riders were coming back. He had lost.

SOMEONE was bending above him. His brain was awlirl. He heard a voice speaking from far away: "He's coming around, Sheriff!"

"Thank God, Doc! Just to think, the damn little runt went in there single-handed! Cleaned them out! When that black stallion of his come tearin' back along the trail with that feller tied to

him Hell, it made me'n the boys ashamed of ourselves! A little sawed-off seedwart like him goin' in there; an' us, a whole damn posse, waitin' for him to send out them hellions all tied-up for us!

"They was three hombres chasin' the black stallion. We got two of them an' the third turned tail. Then we started after him. We heared the shots, an' when we got there we found Madley tied on a hoss—an' this daggoned wart . . ." The sheriff broke off abruptly, mopped his face with a bandana and swore. "The fastest shootin', littlest, bow-legged hombre thet ever forked a hoss! . . . Hell, gents! This here Pewee Biggers is the biggest damn man in seven states. He's a keg of black powder, a load of dynamite an' a cage full of wildcats all mixed together!"

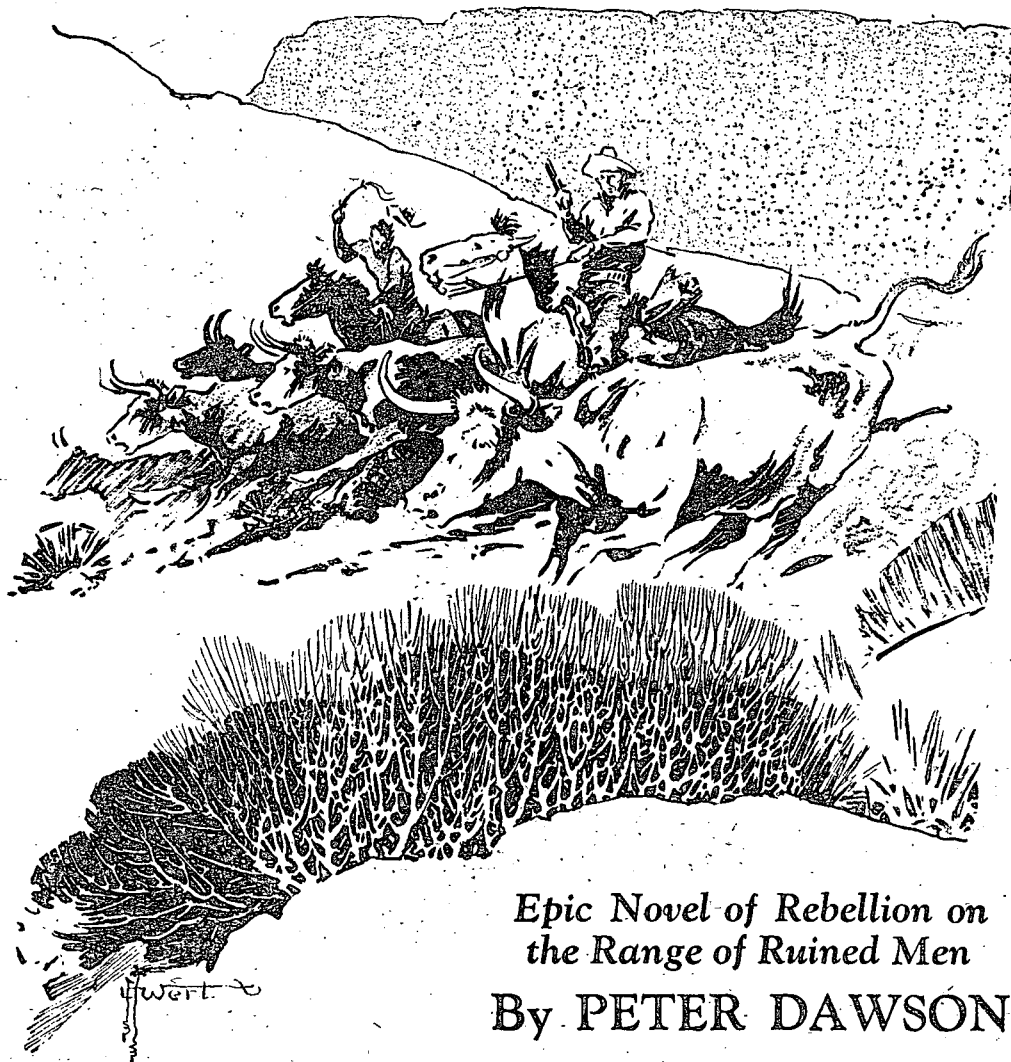
Pewee turned his head slowly upon the pillow. A feeble grin came onto his lips.

"Hell, Sheriff," he protested weakly, "yo're plumb embarrassin' me with your talk! What little I done was just—"

"—a job for a Ranger!" completed the sheriff. "An' by th' Almighty, partner, yuh shore done that job!"

Statement of ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Act of Congress of March 3, 1933, of Big-Book Western Magazine, published bi-monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1936. State of New York, county of New York, ss. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Harold S. Goldsmith, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of the Big-Book Western Magazine and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, embodied in section 411, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. Editor, Harry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. Managing Editor, none. Business Manager, Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. 2. That the owner is: Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y., Harry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y., Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: none. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner, and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest, direct or indirect, in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. Harold S. Goldsmith, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 29th day of September, 1936. Edwin F. X. Silk, Notary Public, Bronx Co. No. 244, Reg. No. 76-S-37. Cert. filed in N. Y. Co. No. 183, Reg. No. 7-S-113. Cert. filed in Kings Co. No. 28, Reg. No. 7-113. Cert. filed in Queens Co. No. 1400, Reg. No. 5851. (My commission expires March 30, 1937.) [Seal]—Form 3526—Ed. 1933.

POSSE OF OUTLAWED



*Epic Novel of Rebellion on
the Range of Ruined Men*

By PETER DAWSON

Chapter I

GUN-JUSTICE FOR STRANGERS

AN AIR of tense expectancy ran through the crowd that milled in the dusty street before the courthouse of Singletree. It was the appearance of a black-garbed figure in the doorway of the building that abruptly quieted the undertone of conversation.

All eyes turned upward to watch the man as he came to the head of the steps, flanked by four, sober-faced, gun-belted men. His

glance shuttled briefly over the throng below before he sauntered down, seemingly unaware of the presence of these watchers.

He made an impressive figure even though he was shorter than the average in this country of tall men; for in his swaggering walk, the out-thrust chin, and in the grey eyes that were hard as polished granite, there was a suggestion of rugged strength that made up for his lack of height.

At the foot of the steps the crowd gave way and the little knot of men passed through and across the street. Covertly hos-

MEN



To his own measure, Montana Pierce fashioned a hangnoose that would bait the Singletree land-grab tyrant from his hideout. . . . He bucked the rule of a range-lord whose word was Law, fighting to win back the right to live, for his beaten, broken cowmen neighbors—though he himself must die!

tile glances followed them, but it was obvious that the man and his bodyguard commanded a belligerent respect.

Ahead of him, one of his guards turned in from the awninged walk to shoulder through the slatted doors of a saloon. Inside, the gunie stopped in midstride, his right hand falling smoothly to the butt of the Colt's, tied low on his thigh.

"Easy, Ace!" ordered the man in black

to his guard as he pushed into the saloon a moment later, and at the command the guard's poised hand dropped away from the gun-butt.

The man in black squinted a little, searching through the half-light of the room until he saw the lone man who stood quietly regarding him from the center of the bar to his left. There were others there, too, but they stood across the room and he ignored them.

"I thought I told you to leave Singletree, Montana!" he said.

The shadow of a smile played across the angular features of the man called Montana. His brown eyes glinted with some inner amusement and then the look hardened as his face went expressionless.

"I don't scare easy, Frazer!" he answered levelly, shifting his back-thrust elbows a little on the bar-top. "Thought I'd hang around and see you finish the fram-in'!"

Frazer flushed at the words. "You're makin' big talk!" he rasped, spacing his words carefully to hide his annoyance. The hard lines of his thin-lipped face made him ugly as he edged forward a little to give the others behind him room to enter.

"Nothin' I'm sayin' that I won't back up!" Montana drawled tauntingly. "Any time!"

Effortlessly, Montana pushed himself erect from his slouch against the bar. His tall, flat-hipped frame was deceptively relaxed as he stood there calmly surveying the five men at the door. From the crown of his soiled Stetson to the toes of his soft high-heeled boots he was quietly alert.

Behind Frazer there was the hint of a stealthy movement. At this instant Montana lunged sideways, his hand sweeping downward and rising in a blasting stab of flame. The man behind Frazer spun about, crashing into the wall, and a choked cry broke from his twisted lips. The Colt's he had been swinging upward pounded solidly to the floor and a splotch of crimson spread across his right shoulder. The others stood unmoving, tense and watchful, ignoring the wounded man's muttered oaths.

The smoke curled upward from the blue snout of the Colt's as Montana straightened and once more took his position at the bar. He flicked the .45 back into his worn holster. "Anybody else want more o' that medicine?" he asked in quiet defiance.

FOR seconds the air was heavy with impending action; the silence was like that interval between a lightning flash and the ensuing thunder. It was a silence that branded these five men at the door as nerveless, standing as they were before the deadly gunswift of this drawling puncher.

A shout from the outside broke the tension. Through the doors slammed a tall, shad-bellied oldster wearing a sheriff's badge. He stood glaring about, his black-browed gaze fixed for an instant on the wounded man who still leaned against the wall; then abruptly he singled out Montana.

"What the hell's this?" he boomed, standing with feet spread a little, and pushing his hat onto the back of his hairless head.

"You missed it, Lawman!" Montana told him. "This sidewinder—"

"Arrest him, Canby!" Frazer cut in.

The sheriff looked first at Montana, then at Frazer, and finally back again to Montana. "You're under arrest, Pierce," the lawman echoed in compliance with the orders of the man in black. "I'm damned if I'll let any gunslinger raise this kind o' hell in Singletree!"

Montana calmly surveyed the sheriff. Finally he spoke, stopping Canby's move to come forward.

"Frazer, why don't you get the rest o' your outfit? Send out for Judge Solom, some more o' your Bar Z hairpins and your open range homesteaders that sat the jury today! So they convicted Clem Walker! You framed him and made it stick! Maybe with enough men backin' you you'd make this new stunt of yours stick! As it is, you're plumb harmless!"

"Pierce, you're under arrest!" Canby repeated, but now his tones had none of the certainty they had had a moment before. "Hand over your hardware!"

Montana's wary glance shuttled over Frazer and his men, finally coming back to Canby. "And here we have a lawman!" he sneered in mocking derision. "Canby, if you come one step closer I'll blow you hell to breakfast!"

He leaned forward a little, and again there was that flip of his hand that brought his Colt's hip high, covering the men before him before they could move. He sidled away from the bar, circling toward an open window that let out onto the street, moving with a cat-like ease. Frazer and his men pivoted as he moved, following him with their eyes.

When he stood at the window he said, "There's six o' you standin' there! Why

doesn't someone make a play? Canby, next time you try to make an arrest have someone along who'll back your play!"

Montana stepped through the window. Frazer let out an oath and turned toward the doors, pushing his men ahead of him. Canby crowded behind, drawing his two .45's. Outside, the Bar Z gunies came to an abrupt halt. Montana had waited beside the window and now held the steady muzzle of his Colt's lined at the group.

"You gents stay set!" he told them. "I'm headed up this alley. The first ranny who follows me gets cut to doll rags."

Lazily he stepped backward, a tight smile of reckless challenge on his lips. Abruptly he was gone.

Frazer cursed his men, but not one of them attempted to follow. Canby finally pushed through and started for the alley, broke into a run when the pounding of hoofs echoed between the buildings. When he turned into the alley it was empty.

ACROSS the street, on the court-house steps, stood two people who had witnessed what went on in the street. One of them was a girl of perhaps twenty whose quizzical hazel-eyed glance travelled on up to the end of the street where a rider suddenly had appeared from between two adobe houses.

"There he goes, Jim!" she said, speaking to the man who stood beside her. "What does it mean?"

"Mean?" he echoed, his wrinkled face lined with a frown. "Nothin'."

"That was Montana Pierce, Jim."

"Uh-huh. He quit workin' for Frazer the day your dad was arrested."

"He had a gun on Canby and Frazer," she said, puzzlement written on her ivory-tinted face. "That's queer."

"What's queer about it?" Jim asked. "Those trigger-wizards are always havin' scrapes. Montana's just another Bar Z polecat, Miss Betty!"

She was silent a moment, looking across the street to where the crowd milled about the saloon entrance. "Perhaps he's broken with Frazer after this. Any decent man would."

Jim snorted. "Miss Betty, you're forgettin' that it was men like Montana and Frazer that put your dad behind the bars!"

Betty shook her head. "But he's different," she insisted. "I don't believe Montana took any part in what they did to dad."

"Don't let him fool you," Jim told her. "He's just another no account gun-slingin' saddle bum or he wouldn't have hired out to Frazer in the first place. He probably helped Frazer plant that stolen herd in our pasture."

"You don't know it was Frazer!" she flared. "How can you be so sure?"

"Common sense," Jim reasoned. "Who else would want to get Clem Walker out o' the way? Who's hoggin' the range and drivin' the little fellow off? It couldn't be anyone but Frazer! He's after the Circle W water and he'll get it one way or another. And just because we're strangers here—because only three years on this range still makes us strangers—these gutless people are goin' to stand by and let him do it!"

"There must be enough decent people around to stop a thing like that!"

"There aren't," Jim asserted explosively. "The trial today showed they're lily-livered when it comes to buckin' the Bar Z! It was one of Frazer's hands who found the rustled stock in our pasture and reported it to Canby. It was a parcel of Frazer's open range homesteaders on the jury today that found your dad guilty. The idea of Clem Walker bein' convicted on a rustlin' charge may seem addle-headed to us because we know him, but he's still a stranger in this country. Frazer framed Clem Walker, had him tried, and is makin' it stick!"

"Let's ride, Jim," Betty sighed. "I've got to get out of here."

Chapter II

RUSTLERS—ALL OF US!

THEY went out into the street, followed by the curious glances of those about them, got their horses at the livery stable and headed out of town. They rode out across the bench-like grass lands that stretched away toward the low hazy foothills. It was mid-afternoon and the sun's glare made the shimmering distance deceptive so that the jagged peaks of the

Antelopes seemed far off and floating in an ocean of blue fog.

"What's next?" Betty Walker finally asked in a small voice. "Will you be lookin' for another job, Jim?"

Jim jerked a sideward glance at her and half turned in the saddle. "Do you think I'm leavin' after sidin' Clem for the last ten years?" His glance softened as he took in Betty's drooping figure. "We'll get through this some way. Don't you fret about that."

Betty was silent, half-heartedly glad that things were finally settled. The last few days had been slow torture for her. Clem Walker's arrest had come without warning, and the three days since he entered jail had been spent in a frantic, useless search for evidence that would prove his innocence. Now it was over and to be in the saddle once again and riding through the stillness of this vast open range was a relief, yet it left her feeling alone and weary. Jim, for the first time, now saw the worry, that Betty had so well concealed for the past few days, written plainly on her fine-featured face.

"We'll go 'long without Clem for a spell, Miss Betty," Jim said. "Give me a little time and I'll hunt down the coyotes that planted that wet beef on us. It won't be long before your dad's back again."

The shadow of some inner thought took the light out of her eyes. "Jim, I haven't told you, but we're in bad shape." Her face was averted and he could not read the expression on it.

"Bad shape?" he echoed. "Oh, well! We'll make out."

"Not if the herds keep falling off," she insisted. "We aren't going to have much of a count this roundup."

"We'll see they don't fall off any more."

"How can we? We haven't the money to hire the men it would take to guard them. No, Jim! Unless we can get dad back to run things we'll be cleaned out before another year rolls around!"

Suddenly realizing that she was right, Jim made no attempt to deny the fact. This thing had been uppermost in his mind even before the calamity of Clem's arrest struck them. The fire went out of him and he slouched in the saddle, his spare figure drooping with an utter weariness.

"Somethin' may happen to help," he said lamely and without conviction.

A heavy silence hung over them for the rest of their ten mile ride. Long before the weathered frame buildings of the Circle W rose up out of the distance, the sky had banked with black thunder clouds, seeming to suit their mood. The breeze that had been gently stirring across the distances gave way to a sultry stillness and the heat became oppressive. The sun, red for the past hour, finally lost itself in a haze that rose up out of the far off mountain valleys.

"The arroyos'll be runnin' water before sundown," Jim said. Betty made no answer, and he could not be sure that she had heard.

The storm began in a low muttering of far off thunder, shortly before the too early darkness blanketed down over the plain. For an hour a hushed stillness deadened all the evening sounds; then the rain started, slowly at first, coming down in huge splashing drops until it gathered in volume to a pelting downpour.

UNDER the protection of the wide porch that ran across the face of the bunkhouse, Jim and two others sat in the darkness watching the storm. The two, along with two more riders who were now at a line camp in the hills, completed the Circle W crew that had formerly numbered a dozen riders.

Clem Walker had let his men go one by one as the spread drifted toward certain financial ruin. Rustling had taken a heavy toll on the herds, and Walker, powerless to keep them guarded in the face of a constant danger, had seen the Circle W sapped of its strength. Now, no longer drawing pay, these four were staying on out of sheer loyalty to a man they had learned to respect deeply.

The three of them were wordless, watching in complete silence the ferocity of the storm. Sharp rolling bursts of thunder punctuated the lightning flashes that showed the drenched landscape in the distance. The steady drone of the downpour filled in the intervals between the lightning crashes.

The road that led away from the yard was running water that had already cut

deep gashes in the loose, rutted soil. In the brief glimpses they had of it they could follow the course of the torrent until it dropped into an arroyo at the foot of the slope.

In one of those split-second flashes they saw a rider outlined against the grayness beyond, coming up the road, his horse at a walk. Jim got up out of his chair, waited impatiently for the few seconds until there was another lightning flash and he could see the man again.

"Get your irons," he ordered finally, and the other two faded through the inky shadow of the doorway. When they returned he told them, "He's headin' for the house. Rick, you go over and get in the back way. Don't show a light until you savvy what this is all about! Al and I will go out front and meet him. It may not mean trouble, but there's a lot of two-legged coyotes runnin' loose on this range! We can't take chances with Miss Betty here."

None of them took the time to get their ponchos, but dressed as they were, they ran out into the storm and across to the house. Jim and Al had waited less than ten seconds when there was a call from out front.

"Hello!"

"Hello, yourself!" Jim answered. "Who is it?"

"Montana Pierce!"

MONTANA sat hunched over in the saddle, his face shielded against the driving rain by the rim of his Stetson, waiting for the voice he had recognized as Jim Early's to reply. He was about to shout out his name again, thinking he had not been heard, when Jim finally spoke gruffly out of the blackness of the porch:

"Light and come on in!"

Montana swung stiffly to the ground, unbuckled his poncho and threw it over his saddle. "Hell of a night!" he said as he stepped in under the wide porch roof.

"What'll you have?" Jim asked in unwelcome abruptness.

"I rode out to see Miss Walker."

"Maybe she don't want to see you," came Jim's blunt statement. "Frazer's gunies aren't welcome here!"

A rectangle of light all at once flooded

out onto the porch as the house door swung open. Framed in the light was Betty Walker's straight, delicately rounded figure.

"Jim," she said. "Any man's welcome in this storm. Come in, Montana!"

Montana followed her into the house, feeling a little awkward in her presence, wondering if he should have chosen this way of helping her. His eyes followed her every move, tasting the peculiar thrill it gave him to be this close to her. Betty Walker affected him that way; strangely too, for Montana was unwilling to admit to himself, even yet, that any woman could interest him. She seemed more real than other girls he had known, for there was no pretense about her. When she spoke, her mellow tones carried a conviction that was heightened by the directness of the look in her hazel eyes.

Montana had never thought of her as being beautiful, yet instinctively he knew that she was. Her perfectly formed features were set in a strong, though delicately feminine, face that was expressive of her every mood. There was a poise about her that showed strength and character. Even now, knowing that she must be wearied to the core over the events of the day, he saw that her boyishly-square shoulders were back, her carriage erect, and her chin set in clear indication she was not beaten.

"You've a lot of explainin' to do, Montana!" Jim spoke up. "Let's have it."

"I heard you needed a man out here," Montana said, speaking to Betty. "I came out for the job."

"We told no one we needed a man," she answered him, a puzzled frown wrinkling her high forehead.

"I reckon you didn't," he admitted. "But you'll be needin' help now with your dad gone."

"We're lookin' out for ourselves," Jim's voice boomed. "We don't have any use for gun-slingers!"

"I can rope and ride better'n any man on this spread," Montana told Jim levelly.

"Get this, Montana!" Jim began. "We—"

"But it's true, Jim!" Betty cut in. "We need men—any men who'll take our starvation wages."

Jim turned sombre eyes on her. "I've

worked for Clem Walker the best part of my life and we've never had to hire gun-jacks to keep our own. It's too late to start now! If you want to take Pierce on, you don't want me!" His glance swung around to rake Montana.

"I reckon I'll go," Montana answered levelly. "I only wanted to help."

Jim said, "If you want to help, then ride out of here!"

MONTANA smiled meagerly, shrugged, and turned away. He might have expected this. Deep within him he knew that Jim belonged here—that it was no choice Betty could make. If the Circle W was to go down, it would go down Clem Walker's way—string-straight and fine!

He crossed the porch and walked out through the driving downpour to where his thick-shouldered chestnut gelding stood with down-hanging head. His movements were mechanical as he threw on his poncho, climbed to the saddle and rode away. This way, then, was closed.

Once before he had seen men make their own law, as Frazer was doing. That time five forked men had driven him out of the Coconino Sink—had driven him to killing two of them. It was a hard lesson, but he had learned it. If it had worked once for them, it would work again, for him.

So, two days afterwards, he faced five more men. But this time the five men were listening to him. It was in a shack far up Bitter Creek Canyon. He had chosen well. Each man here hated Frazer, had been robbed, broken, beaten by him!

Of them all, Pewee Steele was the biggest and the most stubborn. His thoughtful face and his unhurried manner would be indicative of the thoughts of the rest. The time it took him to come to a decision would give Gabe Halpin time to cool off, Rand Avery time to recall the gun-whipping Ace Doolin had given him, and Ben Tilton time to let his old man's grudge freshen. Juan Martinez needed no urging, for two years he had been waiting for the chance to revenge Frazer's desertion of his sister.

His face unsmiling, his voice level, he had told them of his plan. He was completing his instructions to Pewee:

"... So you see, you'll risk your neck,

Pewee, but if it fails you'll ride out of the country with the rest of us—ride light, hard, hell for leather!"

Gabe Halpin's long frame seemed to couple together as he lounged from the table, faced Pewee and said softly, "That don't take thinkin' out, Pewee!"

Juan Mercado said, "Me, I'm theenk Frazer look more better weeth knife in his neck!"

"Some rannies would rather die that way than lose land," Ben Tilton said. "Frazer's one of 'em."

Rand Avery said, stroking a scar on his cheek, "We're only six but what the hell! I chance it."

"The two Wheeler boys are in it. I came from their layout this afternoon," Montana said. He had been saving this as a driving wedge.

Now they tangled. Ben Tilton was dubious, impervious to Gabe Halpin's scorn; Mercado had a different plan. Avery was quiet, watching Pewee. Finally Montana said:

"How about it, Pewee?"

Pewee looked carefully at his finger nails and said slowly, softly, "Let's try it your way, Montana. If anything'll ever work, it will."

Montana's glance shuttled over these men. He said, "Do you all want it my way?"

When they nodded, his face relaxed for the first time. "Wheeler's spread is closest to the railroad. We can push 'em from Gabe's Rockin' H—"

"Not mine any more," Gabe cut in bitterly. "Not since Frazer burned me out!"

Montana corrected himself. "We can push 'em from what used to be Gabe's place, over the malpai—" he allowed himself a down-bearing smile—"you rustlers!"

Chapter III

CAVALCADE OF BEATEN MEN

SHORTLY before daybreak Montana sat hunkered down, his back against a jack-pine, scanning carefully a pasture that was bordered by the stand of timber in which he was hiding. In the ghostly light of the moon he could pick out the darker shadows that he knew were cattle. Here

was the Bar Z pasture where Henry Crossan rode herd, and if he was not mistaken it was Henry Crossan who was slowly circling the herd and heading toward him.

It seemed an eternity before the rider came close enough for Montana to recognize him, yet when he saw the black and white checked shirt he knew that he had found his man. He hailed him softly, and as the sound of his voice drifted out across the still air Crossan shifted suddenly in the saddle and his hand dipped to draw the carbine from the scabbard on the far side of his horse. He did not move for several seconds, but then advanced slowly toward Montana, his Winchester ready in the crook of his arm.

"What d' you want?" he growled when he was still twenty yards away.

"Howdy, Henry!"

Crossan gave a visible start. "Well, I'll—!" The rest of his words were lost as he spurred forward and drew rein a short distance away. "Come out and show yourself!"

Montana came out into the light. "Did you think I'd skipped the country?" he asked.

"Hell, no!" Henry replied. "Not you!"

"Henry, we're out to cut in on Frazer's play," Montana told him, coming abruptly to the purpose of his visit. "Pewee, Gabe Halpin, the Wheeler boys, and a few others. Want to come in on it?"

In the strong light of the moon, Montana caught Henry's startled look, saw the broad grin that spread across his lean face. "Do I want in on it!" he exclaimed. "Am I loco? Sure, I'm in!"

Montana was silent a moment, then said, "I've been figurin', Henry. You're usin' the Bar Z as a hideout from somethin' or other, or you wouldn't stay two minutes, ridin' herd for a sidewinder like Frazer!"

Crossan gave him a long look before he replied. "Seems like more'n one of Frazer's hairpins is on the dodge. I don't deny it."

"Doesn't mean a thing to me!" Montana shrugged. "Only I wanted to get it straight. I've heard you speak your mind once or twice about Frazer. I figure you're achin' to see him pay for a few of the things he's done. Well, so are the rest of us."

"Montana, if there's anything I can do to help you put that polecat at the end of

a rope, I'm with you! When do we ride?"

Montana quickly ran over in his mind the things he knew about Crossan; his straightforwardness, his sincere loathing of Frazer's methods, and lastly that queer, unspoken friendship that he had for the man. If he was any judge at all, Crossan would fit in with his plans.

"You're good to me right where you are," Montana said to him. "There's enough in our bunch to handle things on the outside. If you'll stay at the Bar Z and work from the inside, you'll be doin' the most good."

"What do I do?"

"Nothin' yet. In a day or so I'll be back. You'll be here?"

"I reckon," Henry replied. "I've been here three weeks now, and Frazer ain't goin' to take the guards off his critters."

They talked a few minutes more and then Montana left, satisfied that Henry fitted in with the plans. An hour later he was four miles back in the hills where he made a fireless camp. As he lay in the blankets looking up at the winking stars he felt a strange elation. In planning all this he had not realized how willingly others would join him. Finally he closed his eyes, anxious that sleep should bring closer his meeting with Pewee and the rest.

A ROPE snaked down from above to coil half its length on a rocky ledge sixty feet above the canyon floor. As it etched its thin line against the star-sprinkled void of the sky, six dark silent figures came down it hand over hand to stand on the ledge.

Montana waited until Gabe stood beside him. "Which way?" he asked.

In answer Gabe moved off to his right and they started down through the tumbled mass of rock and stunted piñon. Once Montana cautioned Gabe about going too fast, as Pewee loosed a small rock from above. Luckily it did not roll far, but from there on they proceeded with more caution.

Below, Montana could see the outlines of the three buildings, one larger than the others. This larger building was in the center of a barren plot of ground. Forty feet behind it, almost directly underneath their path, was a fringe of tall cedars. Darkness hid the cattle that Montana knew were grazing in the pasture that ran down the center of the wide canyon.

When they were in the trees below, behind the house, Montana sent Juan off first, giving him a five minute start before the others melted into the shadows after him. He stood with Gabe a moment, watching Pewee's bulk disappear through the trees. Then he stepped out, walked silently across the open stretch of ground to the rear of the main building. Quickly he crawled beneath an open window along the side wall and drew up at the front corner.

It took him ten long seconds to creep into the shadows of the unfloored porch, Gabe following closely behind. They waited a moment beside the open door, and then Montana abruptly stepped inside, drawing his Colt's.

The silence of his entrance was unbroken for long moments. Then Gabe stepped in after him and there was an ominous creaking of a loose board. The low snoring of a man in a bunk at the right continued unbroken, but at once Montana heard a stealthy movement across the room.

"Who the hell's that?" came a voice the next instant. There was a short, tense silence. Then, "Wake up, boys! There's someone in here!"

Montana waited, heard the others stir. Across the room he heard a man climb from his bunk and move stealthily along the far wall.

Crash!

A thundering shot unexpectedly blasted the silence. Montana instinctively swung his Colt's around, thumbed a shot at the floor in the direction of the gun flash.

"Throw down your cutters!" he called out sharply. "We've got the place surrounded!"

"Like hell!" came an angry snarl, punctuated with the crashing roar of a .45 that momentarily lighted the room with its purple flame-stab. Gabe's Colt's tore loose in an instantaneous answer. It was followed by a choked groan and after a moment the dull thud of a body falling.

"Someone light the lamp!" came another voice. "Bill's hurt bad."

"Don't be a damn fool!" barked another. "There's two of 'em waitin' to cut down on us."

Montana groped about him, found Gabe, and pulled him by the sleeve along the wall and into a corner. Some instinct must have

prompted him to change his position, for the next instant three .45's launched out a staccato blast from the other end of the room.

The beating inferno of those shots had not yet died down when there came a crash as a table overturned, and the men opposite rushed to the spot where Gabe and Montana had been. Montana saw one of the figures framed in the paler light of the doorway. He swung his Colt's around, felt it buck in his hand; then threw himself to the floor.

As two .45's cut loose at the spot where he had stood, he saw the figure in the doorway stumble backwards and fall out onto the porch.

FROM outside came the muffled sound of two closely spaced shots. There was a momentary silence before three more shots thudded out. In the room no one moved. Montana waited.

"Let's cut loose of this place!" came a loud whisper. "There's more outside."

Without stopping to answer, three figures plunged through the doorway. Montana and Gabe thumbed their .45's, spattering the floor near the door with their slugs, aiming low. The three gained the porch, only to be brought up short as Ben Tilton's voice boomed out of the darkness.

"Stand where you are, gents!"

Montana was on his feet, and in two strides was standing at the door. "Reach!" he drawled quietly. "You're through!"

In the dim light he saw the three hesitate one brief instant. He fired once, could see where the bullet kicked up the dust at their feet. At that, they dropped their six-guns, slowly raised their hands.

Montana and Gabe picked up their guns. Searching the men, Montana found two knives and a small, wicked-looking deringer. As he stepped away and called to Ben, Pewee and Rand Avery rounded the back corner of the building, prodding before them two other prisoners.

"There's one ranny out there who won't ever straddle his hull again!" Pewee announced.

"Ben, you and Gabe high-tail down and help Juan with that guard." Montana said quickly. "If he's had any trouble—"

"No one 'ave trouble, Montana!" came

a voice close at hand. Juan came up out of the shadows. "The hombre up there keeck up wan, beeg fuss. It was hees last!"

"Take a look over here!" Pewee called out now, from around the corner of the building. Montana walked over, saw him bending over a prone figure on the ground. "Look what was tryin' to crawl away!"

Montana looked more closely, and even in the dim light recognized the thin, hawk-like features of Pewee's captive.

"Howdy, Ace!" Montana said levelly, trying to keep the surprise out of his face. "So you're runnin' this end of Frazer's business?"

"Pierce, your carcass won't be worth a spick peso when Frazer hears about this!"

"Ace, you were along the other day in Sirree when I told Frazer I couldn't be scared out! I haven't changed my mind." He paused, but Ace made no answer, so he went on. "Pewee, look Ace over and patch him up. He's leadin' his gunies home."

In ten minutes, five Bar Z horses stood with their riders lashed face down across their saddles, hands and feet laced together under the horses' bellies. Ace Doolin, the Bar Z ramrod, was astride his saddle with his feet bound tightly to the cinch.

Montana took Ben aside. "Take 'em as far as the alfalfa this side of the breaks. Turn 'em loose and high-tail over to Wheelers. We'll meet you there sometime tomorrow."

"Montana!" came Ace's voice. "Loosen this damned rope! That spick's got me tied tighter'n fence wire."

"I reckon you'll make it home all right, Ace," Montana answered. "Tell Frazer we went easy on you rannys tonight. Next time, it'll be different!"

"You figure Frazer'll let this go by without huntin' you down?" Ace snarled.

"I've quit tryin' to figure him," Montana answered. "But I'm makin' this stick. Now get goin'!"

Chapter IV

A FIGHTING MAN!

THE faint, gray flush of dawn showed in the east when Ace Doolin's paint gelding plodded patiently into the large

corral that stood below the ranchhouse of the Bar Z. Ace was slumped forward in the saddle, his head hanging weakly above the gelding's withers. Two other jaw-branded Bar Z horses loomed up out of the shadows to stand beside Ace's horse, the unwieldy bulk of the riders lashed across the saddles making the animals misshapen in the half light.

"Ace!" came the choked cry from one of the bound gunies. "Ace, damn it, wake up! Get me off this jug-head!"

Ace stirred visibly, came slowly back to consciousness, realizing that the animal he rode was standing motionless. He raised his head, looked vacantly about him for a moment and gradually picked out familiar objects until there came a full understanding that this nightmare was nearly over.

He was weak from loss of blood, but the chill of the crisp air acted as a tonic to clear his befuddled senses. He shouted once, tried to knee his gelding around the corral and up to the house. But the stubborn animal would not respond, so he continued his hoarse croaking until a light appeared in the bunkhouse window and the dark figures of men came running.

When they had unlashed him and lifted him from the saddle, he said, "A couple of you rannys head out toward the breaks and pick up the other three. Slippery's bronc was buckin' like hell, tryin' to shake Slippery off. The other two followed him."

They carried Ace up to the house, meeting Frazer on the way. The two other riders were taken to the bunkhouse, given a drink of whiskey and put to bed.

Frazer had Ace carried into his office, a small room at the front corner of the large frame building. He hurriedly lit the lamp, watching while one of the men ripped Ace's shirt away and bandaged his wound.

"Who did this?" Frazer asked.

"Montana Pierce!" Ace growled. "He's raided the place up at Bitter Creek, beefed Bill Rowan, and shot up Frank Humphreys and Pete Crowe! Outside of that, he's drivin' off the herd. There were eight or ten of them, maybe a dozen! We didn't have a chance!"

"Why didn't Scotty signal you they were comin'?" Frazer asked. "Wasn't he posted at the Narrows?"

"Sure!" Ace drawled sarcastically. "Sure, but they got to 'im! Juan Martinez took care of him."

"Is that knifin' spick sidin' Montana?"

"He is," Ace nodded, "along with some other salty rannys. Gabe Halpin, Pewee Steele, Ben Tilton, and a few others! Just a pack of your friends, Boss!"

Frazer paced nervously up and down in front of Ace's chair, his heels clicking on the bare floor boards.

"Well," Ace said finally. "Are you goin' to stay here and let him drive off all that rustled beef?"

Frazer stared thoughtfully before him for a long moment. The dull yellow glow of the lamp on the desk served to accentuate the breadth of his chunky figure and threw along the wall an enlarged, ape-like shadow that was strangely weird.

"This is somethin' that calls for thought and not powdersmoke, Ace. We'll let Pierce get away with it, this once. Maybe next time he'll make a mistake cuttin' in on my game! If he does— we'll see!" he said ominously.

TEN days later, in mid-afternoon, Montana was riding across the northern edge of Circle W range, half a mile out from the foothills, heading toward that spur of timber that bordered the Bar Z pasture where Henry Crossan rode herd.

The events of the past few days had wrought a subtle change in him. His lean, angular face was lined with an unnatural frown that came from an intense inner weariness; for there had been hard riding and little sleep since the raid on Gabe Halpin's old spread.

But there was satisfaction in thinking of what he had accomplished. After the raid in Bitter Creek Canyon, they had driven out of it three hundred head of cattle that showed signs of recent branding. They had spent all the next day driving them through the hills and across the mountains by way of a low pass. Late the same night they had arrived at the Rafter W hill pasture and left the herd in charge of the Wheeler brothers. The next night they had driven off Frazer's herd of fine yearlings from his western-most range, far distant from the Bar Z. As before, the two gunies who guarded the herd had been lashed to their

saddles and taken back to the Bar Z by Ben Tilton.

Then came the most daring threat to Frazer's strength—the raid on Halfway Wells. The Wells supplied water to four thousand acres of open range on which Frazer had recently planted his hired homesteaders. Montana's men swooped down on the camp, dynamited the Wells, and rode off leaving the dull orange glow of burning buildings lighting up the heavens.

Frazer called in Sheriff Canby then, and for four days now Montana and his men had watched from afar the aimless wanderings of a posse of Bar Z riders, headed by Canby. Although they had been safe the whole time, there was a constant strain.

Frazer's strength was ebbing, his herds diminishing in the same way as had those of the neighboring ranches on which the Bar Z had secretly preyed for so long. His range around Halfway Wells was useless without water, and the herds that had dotted it were already moving out.

Montana's thoughts were interrupted as he sighted a rider coming toward him, still a speck ahead on the brown and green pattern of the level prairie. The sight of the rider pulled him to an abrupt stop, while he debated whether or not to ride the half mile north to the safety of the foothills. His eyes, accustomed to distances, studied the bay horse and found about its swinging run something vaguely familiar. Unconsciously, he thumbed out the butt of his Colt's, deciding to ride on and meet the oncoming horseman. Then came an abrupt recognition of who this was. Betty Walker!

The bay came up fast, leaving behind a plume of dust spreading out in the still, hot air. A surge of excitement hit Montana and he found himself welcoming this meeting. He noted the lithe grace with which Betty sat the saddle, the rhythm of her slender figure seeming to blend in with the powerful strides of the animal she rode. She wore blue levis and a tan shirt, and as she slid the bay to a stop in front of him, her hair took on the burnished gold of the sunlight.

"Howdy, Miss Walker," he greeted, touching the brim of his hat.

She did not answer immediately, but sat

eyeing him with a half quizzical, unsmiling expression. Abruptly she asked, "Why are you doing it, Montana?"

THE directness of the question startled him and while he was groping for an answer, she went on:

"I never thought you'd go this way!"

"What way?" he asked.

"To take to the owl-hoot! With a price on your head!"

He smiled. "That's somethin' new. The reward, I mean!"

"Frazer's offering fifteen hundred dollars for your capture, dead or alive!" she told him, her unflinching gaze boldly meeting his.

"Maybe I ought to offer a reward for him!" Montana said easily. "We're two of a kind."

"You are not!" she flared. "In a week since I saw you, you've done more harm than Frazer ever did on this range!"

"Harm?" He shrugged. "I reckon Frazer's the only one who has a complaint to make."

"What about Halfway Wells?" she asked him. "Four thousand acres left without water! There were seven small ranches on that land. You ruined them."

"They were Frazer's," he said firmly. "Frazer hired those homesteaders, planted them on what was open range two years ago. In another year he'd have gone through the pretense of buyin' 'em out. It was his scheme to hog more land and drive off the other outfits!"

For a moment she looked at him with a certain defiance. "You're being selfish, Montana! You and the rest that ride with you are settling a grudge. What you're doing won't help the rest of us."

"Why should I help?" he queried, laughing scornfully. "Neither you nor any of the rest would trust me. You wouldn't even give me a job!"

"It wasn't I who turned you away!" she said levelly. "It was Jim."

"Then you—" Montana began, but caught himself.

"I've never believed what they said of you," came her soft-spoken words. "I still don't. You aren't a killer, Montana."

He sat silent, at first unbelieving. Slowly her words took root in his mind and with

startling clarity he saw that she believed in him, that she was sincere! Then it was that he understood how blindly he had gone about his selfish mission of vengeance, and that his real wish all along had been to right the wrong done to Clem Walker and his daughter. He had struck at Frazer, not thinking that others besides himself and his men had a grievance against the man. Her words cut in on his thoughts:

"He'll turn all these things against you. You'll be hunted by every rancher around Singletree! If you really want to help, as you say, get some proof against Frazer! But don't keep on with this awful burning, stealing, killing—" A half-sob choked off her words as she wheeled the bay around and abruptly rode away.

He watched her until she disappeared behind a low ridge in the distance. Only then did he continue on the trail that would take him to Henry Crossan.

It was with a wild surge of elation that he realized how Betty's words had crystallized his blind thrusts at the Bar Z owner into one definite purpose. And then came the knowledge that she cared!

A seed of a plan grew in his mind, shaped itself into something so daring as to be incredible! He rode onward, twisting the reins over the saddle-horn and building a cigarette. And to the accompaniment of the creak of saddle leather and the hollow ring of his gelding's hoofs on the bare rock, he weighed the chances of his seeing this new plan through . . .

Chapter V

BAIT FOR KILLER

TWO hours after sundown that evening, Ralph Frazer and Ace Doolin sat in the small office of the Bar Z. Frazer occupied the chair behind the desk, facing the outside door, while Ace sat tilted back against the outside wall. Ace was softly cursing his clumsiness at rolling a cigarette, for his right arm was still stiff from the wound Montana had given him.

The Bar Z owner's black brows contracted in a frown.

"What's eatin' you, Ace?" he asked.

Ace looked up then, seeming to measure Frazer with his glance. "You're goin' soft,

"Boss!" came his startling statement. "Why don't you let me gather up the boys and ride out after that coyote?"

Frazer chuckled. "If you held four aces would you bet the limit and get the counter-jumpers out of the game?"

"No," Ace answered, after due deliberation. "I reckon I'd play 'em close and keep the others in for a grand killin'. But I can't see that you're holding four aces this hand, Boss!"

"I'm not—yet! But after Pierce cuts loose a few more times I will be. I'm lettin' him build himself a reputation, Ace. When he has one, there won't be a rancher in these parts who won't side with me to hunt him down! When he's out of the way we'll be stronger'n ever."

Ace shrugged. "It may work," he said dubiously. "But first I got to see the man who can corral Montana. He's poison."

Frazer's eyes hardened. "Looks to me like you're losin' your guts, Doolin! It looked that way the other day when Pierce made the whole pack of you take water in Singletree!"

The grin that crossed Ace's face was a leering one. "You were in on that, too, Ralph. I didn't see you go for leather!"

Frazer shrugged, and the look he gave his foreman was inscrutable. "I hire men to make my gun-play for me. In case they go yellow, I'll count on my own irons!"

The interruption that came was timely. From outside the sound of a horse pounding into the yard echoed loudly.

Instinctively Frazer stiffened, drew his Colt's and laid it on the desk. The door burst open and Henry Crossan stood framed in it, his face dust-covered and streaked with sweat, his levis foam-flecked from a fast ride.

"Well, Crossan?" Frazer asked, picking his Colt's from the desk-top and dropping it into his holster.

"I've got news!" Crossan said, breathing heavily.

"Must be damned important to bring you five miles at this time of night! You came in a hell of a hurry, too! Come on, what is it?"

Crossan jerked his head in Doolin's direction, raising his eyebrows in a mute query.

Frazer waved impatiently, "Go on, go on!"

"I saw Montana Pierce tonight!" Crossan began. "He—"

"You what?" Frazer shouted, rising out of his chair. "Where was he?"

"He came up to where I was ridin' above the line camp."

"Was it a raid?" Frazer snarled. "How many head did they get away with?"

"None," Crossan replied. "Montana came up to see me."

SLOWLY Frazer eased back into his chair again.

"He's wantin' me to ride with him!" Crossan did not look at Frazer as he spoke, but fumbled in his shirt-pocket for tobacco and a match. He did not see the glance Frazer flashed at Ace Doolin, nor the look that passed between them.

"You and Montana were pretty good friends as I remember it," Frazer said significantly.

Crossan nodded. "He's all right, I reckon. But plumb loco for sittin' in a game that's too stiff for him."

"What did you come here to tell me?" Frazer's impatience could wait no longer.

Henry Crossan did not answer until he had lighted his cigarette. When he did speak, his words were flat, pointed. "I've come to claim that reward!"

Frazer could not hide his surprise. His eyes narrowed and an ugly grimace contorted his face. "I'll pay that reward when I see Montana Pierce in jail!"

"He's yours for the takin'!"

"You know where to find him?"

Crossan nodded.

"Where is he?" Frazer asked.

Crossan laughed quietly. "Let's see some of the *dinero* first!"

Frazer's face flushed a dull red beneath his tan. "Crossan, you—!"

"Cut it!" barked Crossan. Then he smiled again. "I reckon we understand each other, Frazer. You see, I don't trust you any more'n you do me! Pay me half that reward now and I'll lead you to Montana Pierce. Pay me the other half when he's in jail."

The thin line of Frazer's mouth was drawn down in a sneer, but as he met Crossan's steady scrutiny he seemed to

sense that here was a man who would take careful handling. Crossan was one of the few men working for him of whom he knew nothing beyond the fact that he was a gunman. Once he had seen Crossan use his Colt's, and as a result of that he had hired the man. Frazer's sneer vanished and a wry smile took its place. "You win, Crossan, but I haven't that much money here now."

"Then I'll wait'll you get it," Crossan replied levelly.

"You're—" Frazer started to speak in anger, but some inner warning told him that this was not the time for bluffing. He rose, went over to the safe in the corner, and worked the combination. In thirty seconds he straightened up, threw a roll of banknotes onto the desk.

Crossan picked up the money, counted it deliberately and then put it in the pocket of his levis. "Saddle up and come with me," Crossan said. "You, Ace here, and a couple more. Montana won't be hard to take. You see, I've already taken him. Got him laced up tighter'n a tick!"

TEN minutes later five riders left the Bar Z yard and went at a fast lope over a low ridge ahead of the house. Henry Crossan led the way. For two miles he rode point toward the west, the others pounding along after him. As he topped a hogback he slid his chestnut to an abrupt stop.

"You'll find Montana Pierce tied up behind that outcropping at the foot of this slope," Crossan announced. "And I've got a Colt's lined at you, Frazer! Just in case you take a notion you want that money back! Montana's down there. Go get him! I'm ridin'!" With that he wheeled the big chestnut around, bent low in the saddle, and thundered off down the far side of the hogback.

Frazer snarled an oath. "Watch out!" he rapped out. "This may be a trap! Circle that rock down there. Stay away from it till you're dead sure of what's there. Ace, you and Red swing off to the right! Runt, stick with me! Throw lead if you see anything move. Hurry!" He spurred forward and the others spread out.

It was Ace whose shout echoed across to him. "He's there, Ralph!"

The Bar Z ramrod rode in toward the

towering mass of rock and was out of the saddle by the time the others came up, bending over a figure that lay in the sand. Even in that light they could recognize Montana's features, could see the ropes that laced his arms and legs.

Frazer dismounted and strode over to look down at him. "You'll look fine at the end of a rope, Pierce!"

Montana raised his head. "Where's that double-crossin' coyote—"

"If you're referrin' to our mutual friend Henry, he's just ridden away with the reward money I put out for you," Frazer told him.

Ace Doolin leaned over, took Montana by the shirtfront, and hauled him to his feet. "There's a cottonwood over at Poison Springs! Let's ride for it!"

"Hold on!" Frazer rapped out. "He's goin' in to the sheriff!"

"What're you—" Ace blurted out, haltingly.

"We're makin' him stand trial!" Frazer said pointedly. "Savvy?"

A grin broke over Ace's thin face and he nodded his understanding.

Frazer took on the confidence of a man who has finally topped his last obstacle. All the greed for power and success mounted up within him as he stood about, pompously directing his men. They threw Montana over the saddle of one of the riders and headed back for the Bar Z.

"Ace!" Frazer said, pulling in alongside his foreman. "There's not a damn thing to stop us now! What did I tell you?"

Ace shook his head. "You got me, Boss! He sure played into our hands!"

Frazer laughed strangely then, and in that laugh there was a sinister cruelty that made even Ace shudder.

Chapter VI

RANGE-HOGS, MOVE ON!

THE moon edged up over the far horizon as the Bar Z riders neared Singletree with their prisoner. In the clear light the adobes of the town were thrown into gaunt relief; the rounded bulk of their low walls with protruding vigas making them look strangely like a colony of fat, overturned beetles.

Faint shadows hung in the fog of dust that marked the passage of the riders as they turned into the street and moved on toward the jail.

Montana rode between Ace and Frazer, sitting the saddle with his wrists bound to the horn. As if by mutual consent they had made the ride in silence. Montana had looked behind him only once, and that for the purpose of counting the eight Bar Z gunies who completed his guard. It was evident that Frazer was taking no chances with his prisoner.

The only lights showing along the deserted street were in the sheriff's office and the saloon. Frazer dismounted before the jail, threw his reins over the hitch-rail and walked over to unlace Montana's wrists.

"Don't be damn fool enough to try a break," he grumbled as Montana swung stiffly to the dusty street and followed him across the walk and up the steps to the sheriff's office. They found the door open, the office empty, with the lamp on the desk casting a circle of yellow light over the meager furnishings.

In addition to the desk there were three chairs, a safe, a bench along the back, and several reward notices tacked onto the bare walls of the room. An alarm clock ticked off the seconds with a tinny, monotonous sound, its hands indicating the hour to be two-twenty.

Frazer stepped to the steel door at the rear of the office, tried to turn the handle, but found the door locked. As soon as Ace came in, he said, "Send someone up to Canby's house and tell him to come down here with the keys."

While Ace relayed the message to one of the riders outside, Frazer stepped to the desk, pulled open the drawers and went through them. Finally he straightened up and came over to Montana and snapped a pair of handcuffs over his wrists.

"You're playin' me plenty safe, Frazer!" Montana said, grinning broadly.

"I'm playin' to see you swing with your neck in a noose tomorrow!" came Frazer's ready answer.

"You've played 'em close all along, haven't you?"

Frazer took a seat in Canby's chair behind the desk before replying. "If you knew me better you'd know I never play

'em any other way!" Frazer leaned back, hands laced over his stomach, casually surveying Montana. There was about him an air of supreme confidence as he shifted, reached into his vest pocket for a cigar and bit off the end of it. His eyes did not leave Montana as he lit a match and drew the smoke of his cigar down into his lungs with evident relish. A low chuckle issued from between his parted lips and he said softly, "You damn fool, you!"

Ace came across the room and sat on the edge of the desk, one foot swinging idly as his cursory glance ran over Montana.

"Supposin' I'd called Canby out to see that wet beef we found up at Gabe Alpin's place the other night, Frazer!" Montana said. "You'd have had some tall explainin' to do!"

Frazer shrugged carelessly. "What do you suppose I pay Canby for?"

"So you do pay him?" came Montana's question, his brows contracted in a look of seriousness. "Careful what you say, Frazer! I might spill a few things at my trial tomorrow—if I'm to have a trial!"

"You'll get a trial, right enough!" Frazer said softly, his gray eyes glinting coldly with amusement. "Only there won't be anyone who'll believe a word you say! Tomorrow's my day, Pierce, and I'm makin' the best of it!"

MONTANA was silent for a moment. As he lifted his shackled hands to his shirt-pocket for his tobacco he flashed a glance at Ace, saw the frown on his lean face as he regarded Frazer. It was what Montana wanted. He spoke again. "When I'm out of the way you can run hog-wild on this range, eh?"

"Why not?" Frazer replied arrogantly, a low chuckle shaking his frame. "Two years from now the Bar Z brand will be runnin' across three counties along the foot of the Antelopes! There's nothin' to stop me!"

"Careful, Boss!" drawled Ace. "You'll be sayin' somethin' out of turn!"

"Careful, hell!" Frazer snapped, leaning forward in his chair. "What does it matter what he hears? Who's goin' to believe anything an outlaw says? You've built your own hangnoose, Pierce! When you dyna-

mitted Halfway Wells you made an enemy of every rancher on the range. Your word won't count any more. Even your friend Crossan went against you—turned you over for a reward!"

"Crossan's a dirty sidewinder!" Montana exploded, then relapsed into silence for a moment, seeming to be trying to get control of his temper. "But at least you've lost out with your fake homesteaders! You lose four thousand acres!"

Frazer raised his hands in a matter-of-fact gesture. "It may slow me a year or so. But that water'll come back. I'll put more men out there next year and buy it eventually!"

"Ralph! Dammit, hold on! You're sayin' things!" Ace's warning came again.

"Hobble your tongue, Doolin!" Frazer snarled, banging his fist on the desk-top. "It's my own damned business what I say here!"

Ace muttered something unintelligible under his breath, and sauntered over to the door and stood looking out into the night. It was plain that he had no liking for the turn the conversation had taken.

"That was a hell of a trick you used in framin' Clem Walker!" Montana said bluntly. "A hell of a trick!"

"You broke with me over that, didn't you?" Frazer asked. "Too damned chicken-hearted to back me in that play! I could have used you, too!" he mused.

Although the air was chill, beads of perspiration stood out on Montana's high forehead. He shifted a little in his chair with nervousness. "That was too raw!" he said, emphasizing his words with a look of loathing. "It wouldn't have worked with anyone but Clem—a stranger!"

"I counted on that," Frazer said, seeming to find a satisfaction in divulging his misdeeds. "No one here knows or cares much about Walker!"

"So you made a rustler out of him!"

"I need that Circle W water. It was easy plantin' that herd. Ask Ace! He helped drive it!"

Ace shrugged his disgust without turning.

At that moment a key grated in the lock of the door behind Frazer. He was turning in his chair to search out the noise when

the door swung open and disclosed Pewee's huge bulk framed in the opening. For an instant Frazer hesitated before his hand dropped to his Colt's. In that split-second interval Montana lunged, swept the lamp off the desk to the floor.

Behind Montana two deafening shots blended together, and in the light of those gun-flashes he saw Ace's .45 sweeping upwards. Montana threw his entire weight into the vicious down-sweep of his manacled hands and heard the snap of Ace's wrist as the connecting chain hit it. Ace shrieked horribly, and Montana caught the sixgun as it flew outward from the impact.

He whirled, sent a snap shot in Frazer's direction, turned back toward Ace just as the Bar Z ramrod's left hand stabbed upwards from his left thigh. Ace fired, the gun-flash blinding Montana, and sending a searing burn along his scalp as the slug grazed him. Then Montana thumbed the hammer of his own Colt's viciously, felt the solid buck of it in his hand. Ace's lean frame crumpled and fell forward out of the moonlit doorway.

OUTSIDE, someone yelled, and Montana heard men running across the board walk and up the steps. He braced himself, standing in the center of the room, and raised his shackled hands to throw two deadly shots at the figure of a Bar Z gunie who suddenly sprang into the doorway.

A crash of glass blended with the shooting outside as someone moved alongside Montana and kicked out a window. His hopes rose, as he sensed the presence of the others in the room. The next instant the place was a roaring inferno of beating gun-blast. Rand Avery's lean figure was outlined a moment at the window as he gunned down into the crowd of Bar Z riders at the foot of the steps.

The gunies whipped a hail of lead in through the doors and windows. Montana stepped near a window, peered around the frame and caught a fleeting glimpse of a man running behind the hitch-rail. Montana's Colt's sent a purple flame-stab into the night and the runner sprawled on his face.

Montana lingered there a split-second

too long. A slug tore along his right shoulder as he raised his hands again. A burning stab of pain low in his chest took his breath for a moment. He thumbed his Colt's once more, but the hollow click of the hammer told him it was empty. In a sudden frenzy he moved away from the window, slowly, for it seemed his muscles had lost their coordination.

The stench of powdersmoke was strong in the air and bit into his eyes, blurring his vision. All at once a weakness caught him, dragged him down, and he pitched his length across the floor. He tried to cry out, but a blackness blotted his vision. . . .

PEWEE STEELE'S face took form as the fog of unconsciousness cleared from Montana's brain. Montana saw that Pewee was grinning, that his lips were moving. It was an effort to look about, but he did so, seeing that he was lying in bed in a small, neatly kept room. Pewee's words came to him then:

" . . . You've been a hell of a long time comin' 'round, bad man! We figured for awhile you might be ridin' herd on the clouds."

It came to Montana that Pewee was telling him that he was sick, that he had narrowly escaped death. "How long have I been here?" he asked, feebly.

"Just since mornin'," Pewee told him. A flood of memory left Montana with a mounting curiosity. "Did we get Frazer?"

Pewee's broad grin disappeared. "We got him," he said haltingly. "He was shot up bad so we put him on one of the cots in a cell. Sawbones Yates wouldn't let us move him. That was this mornin'. Well, about an hour ago a mob busted in and took him away!" He paused significantly, his face drawn and gone a little pale.

Montana could guess the rest. With a sudden recollection he blurted out, "Where was Canby? Why didn't he have a guard over the jail?"

"The sheriff blew the top off his head this mornin'," Pewee explained. "Grabbed Juan's cutter and did it before we could stop him. I reckon he saw what was comin'."

After a moment Montana asked, "Was Jim Early in on it?"

"Yeah. Henry Crossan rode out to get him after he'd first taken Frazer over to find you. Told him he'd have to come in to be a witness to a confession. Jim didn't want to miss out on his sleep so he told Henry to get someone else. Henry pulled his iron and brought Jim in anyways. He heard the whole thing from behind the cell block door. When Frazer told about fraimin' Clem Walker I thought he was goin' to claw his way right through that door."

"Henry did a good job, Pewee!"

"He's shakin' like a quakin' aspen right now! Said he'd cut his throat if you cashed in your chips. He feels sort of responsible for startin' the whole thing. He was like a loco steer, waitin' there in the jail before Frazer showed up with you. Said he didn't see why Frazer wouldn't beef you when he found you all trussed up an' waitin' for him."

"Frazer had to play it big, Pewee!" Montana said. "Bringin' me to trial would have made him the big augur around here for good, and he knew it!" He paused a moment, then asked. "How about the rest? Any charges against any of us?"

"Not a one! Gabe Halpin gets his spread back; Clem Walker's out of jail! Hell, there's talk of runnin' you for sheriff! There's others—" Pewee's words trailed off as he stepped backward to look out of the door into the next room. He grinned broadly as he turned to Montana and said in a low voice, "Here comes someone who wants to see you bad!"

Almost before he had finished, Betty Walker came into the room. She stood beside the door for a moment as Pewee awkwardly edged his bulk out through it. For the space of two full seconds she stood there, her loveliness filling Montana with a longing he could not keep from showing in his eyes. Then, abruptly, she came to him, knelt beside the bed and buried her face at his shoulder, sobbing softly. Presently he took her face between his hands and kissed her.

"I'll never turn you away again, Montana!" she said at last, and the smile that sparkled in her eyes told him more than a thousand words.

THE END

Dramatic Fact Article of Lost California Gold

By KENNETH P. WOOD



THE DEAD GUARD WELL THEIR GOLD!

For an empty sack of gold dust, an ambush killer cut down San Bernardino's mystery miner. . . . Killed the one man in all California who could point the trail to the Lee Location riches—buried, now, forever!

EARLY California history is rife with tales of lost gold mines and phantom claims, the most interesting and probably the most authentic being the story of the Lost Lee Mine. The Lee's location is on file among the archives of San Bernardino County, its whereabouts described generally, as was the custom when no survey was made.

During the latter part of the past century, a miner named Lee located the claim. He hired a helper, built a windlass and sank a shaft. He also put up an *arrastre* to reduce his quartz, and at intervals went to San Bernardino to sell the gold dust and purchase tools; powder and provisions.

From all indications, the mine was paying well, for at various times capitalists considered buying it. Lee was not, however, anxious to sell. The locality was remote and difficult of access, and negotiations never got so far as to make a visit to the mine necessary.

Lee went to town as usual one day to get supplies. As he was paying for them with his gold dust, he mentioned that he had to hurry back, as his helper was almost out of food. The next morning he was found dead outside the town, with a bullet hole through his heart. He had not been robbed, and there was nothing to indicate who had assassinated him or why it was done.

Mindful of the plight of the helper, left without provisions at the mine, the public administrator and some friends started out immediately. They failed to find the shaft, *arrastre*, windlass or cabin, and nothing was ever heard of the worker whom Lee had left there. He could scarcely have come away without supplies, for that was not a country in which men could obtain food along the road. . . . That is all that has ever been learned about the Lee Mine. Its secret died with the man who found it!

Novelette of Black Thunder Mesa's Renegade Legion



A PILGRIM VOLUNTEERS—TO DIE!

Unseen rifles blasted from mist-draped deadfalls as Joe Jones found the gun-shelter of that doomed canyon cabin with his dying partner. . . . Soon battering rams would be crashing against his door, and two men would be rising up to take the place of every one he downed. And the only person who could side him was his prisoner—a blue-eyed girl who'd drill him through, the moment he turned his back!

By WILLIAM F. BRAGG

Chapter I

DRY GULCH GREETING

HIGH on the iron rim above Black Thunder Basin, Joe Jones awaited his partner under a lightning-blasted pine tree. The partner, Bill Mulvane, an agent of the Stockmen's Protective Association, was twenty-four hours overdue.

Joe Jones frowned as he looked down into the before-dawn mist that hid the vast mountain valley below him. For months hell had been going on down in that basin. Horse and cattle outfits had been raided, brands had been blotched, and hundreds of stolen ponies had been started down the long trail that ended in the Robbers' Roost country in Utah.

"Bill isn't the lad to bog down easy," Joe Jones said to himself.

He had formed that habit of talking to himself during the lonely weeks of lying out on high mountain divides, watching dim trails and eating cold food. When a man lives such a hermit existence, he finds he must talk to someone, be it himself or his horse.

"Bill," Joe allowed, "must have somethin' hot on the fryin' pan." And as he said that, he gently shifted the holstered sixgun that was tied to his saddle-warped right leg.

Suddenly he grinned, although it hurt his sun-baked lips. If Bill had uncovered a hot trail that would lead to a rounding up of the thieves, it meant a return to headquarters for the two of them. And that, in turn, meant living high for a few weeks and sleeping between sheets, before another venturesome gunpowder-flavored job would be undertaken.

Joe sniffed fog in the dawn breeze and softly clapped his gloved hands together to restore their warmth. If Bill came slipping up to the pine with orders to mount and ride, then a man's gun hand had to be quick with warm blood and limber as a horse wrangler's lariat.

Fog indicated a misty day, hard on riders of the law like Joe and Bill, but excellent for the rustlers who operated secret corrals and holding pastures in the dark

canyons on the west flank of the basin. Fog hid the smoke of branding fires as well as any dust that might be kicked up by ponies being relayed down the mountain hogbacks.

"And it's just the kind of weather," judged Joe, gloomily, "that Bill is sure to find work for us in."

Now above the confused and sleepy sounds of breaking dawn, the twittering of birds in the underbrush, the far-off bellowing of lonely steers, Joe heard the soft thud of unshod hoofs on the rough trail that wound up from the basin.

With his right thumb hooked in his belt and curling fingers not far above the cedar butt of his holstered gun, Joe slipped into the shadow of a big rock alongside the path ahead of him. He blended into the gloom and stood alert and tense, hardly daring to breathe, until he could see the dim bulk of the approaching horse a few yards down the trail.

With gun drawn and braced against the bulge of his right hip, Joe spoke sharply. "Where do you ride tonight?"

That was the opening line of the code sentences by which association riders identified themselves. Often they worked ranges where they dared not wear a badge of the law, or even take the chance of hiding it in their war bags or bedding.

Such a range was the Black Thunder country. That was why Joe and Bill, for a week, had not dared meet. There were more than enough rocked-up graves of men who had talked too much or opened their eyes too brightly at the wrong moment. The Black Thunder gang was smart, desperate, and as murderous as any pack of hungry gray wolves in midwinter.

The horse checked abruptly with a rattle of bridle metal and the squeak of leather. Then came the harsh answer to Joe's query: "I ride to the Snake River Breaks."

It was the right answer, but the wrong man. It wasn't Bill Mulvane!

In that part of his life which Joe Jones had devoted to riding for the law, he had developed an instinct that warns a man of danger. So, on this cold gray dawn, Joe felt the short hairs bristle on the back of his sunburned neck like a hound's hackles.

But he was in a tight spot. He couldn't

pass this stranger up, for the man knew the code that had been agreed upon long before between the partners. He had to play the hand out. So, without stepping out into the trail, he said crisply, "I didn't expect you."

"My name's Tim Yawkey," the reply came quickly. "I been workin' for ol' Abe Gibbs' Cross Ten outfit; together with a pal of yours. It was him sent me. He—he couldn't get away."

JOE JONES groped cautiously for the right thing to say. "Is he sick, mebbe?" he asked.

"Naw." Yawkey laughed raspingly, and it grated on Joe's nerves. "Your friend has set a hen. About daybreak he reckons something will hatch. He sent me to tell you that he might need help when that happens."

Joe Jones knew well enough what was meant. A showdown with the Black Thunder bunch was in the offing. "Did he say where?" Joe asked.

"You've heard of Cayuse McHale?"

Gibbs, owner of the Cross Ten outfit which ran cattle and horses by the hundreds along Black Thunder Creek, when he had called for association help, had bitterly mentioned Cayuse McHale as an enemy of long standing, a mountaineer feudist, and the possible leader of the basin night riders.

"I'll fetch my hoss," Joe said. "I've got him tied up close in a bunch of jack-pines. You pilot me down the trail."

Aboard his rangy black, his rawboned frame easy in the saddle and his carbine loose in its rawhide scabbard, Joe Jones followed Tim Yawkey down into the basin. A red line already outlined the peaks of the Buckhorn Mountains that formed the basin's eastern barrier. It wouldn't be long until the crack of day. But until then, if the fight flared up, a man must depend on the old handgun and its ability to deal out lead at close range.

The light was poor, but as best he could he studied the man riding ahead of him. It was Joe's business to read men as well as brands. But there wasn't much about the fellow to set him apart from dozens of punchers in chaps and slouch hats who followed the chuckwagons from Mexico

to Montana. Yawkey was tall, stoop-shouldered, and the brim of the hat that was pulled down to his large hairy ears, hid his features. He wore a sheep-lined sourdough coat and a pair of bullhide chaps. But even in this poor light, something glinted on his boots. Joe's hard gray eyes flashed.

"Silver-mounted spurs," he grunted. "Not often they shine so bright. Most boys tarnish the metal-work kickin' ashes over campfires, or lettin' 'em lay out in the damp."

Yawkey swung his bay pony around a turn in the trail. For a moment, he disappeared from Joe's sight. When the association man followed around, he emerged on a wide clearing surrounded by sparse timber and not high above the main valley floor. But there wasn't sight nor sound of Tim Yawkey.

Down in the basin, a rifle cracked. Then followed a scattering string of shots. A vast and hollow boom ended the fusillade.

Joe Jones' spurs raked his black from withers to flank as he jumped the startled horse off the trail. Flinging around in his saddle, as the pony galloped free-reined for the nearest cover, Joe raked out his sixgun.

From the jack-pines on the other side of the trail, a rifle barked, and the blast of the muzzle-flash lit up the trailing fingers of gray fog.

Joe's sixgun exploded in a burst of lead and smoke that was pitched to hurry the rifleman who was tracing Joe's retreat with soft-nosed .30-.30 bullets.

Even as he rode, though he felt the backspit of burning powder on his hand where he clutched the big .45, Joe Jones cursed himself for riding blindly into a trap. But then, Tim Yawkey had carried the right word. And that meant that they had either caught Bill Mulvane, or by some craft had discovered the code system he and Bill used.

A BULLET screamed past Joe as he ducked his head while lashing his panting black into the timber that flanked the clearing. Another slug whacked into a tree trunk as his pony gathered its hind-quarters and jumped a down log.

"More than one man," grunted Joe. "They had it all set."

A dim trail cut away to the right, dropping down over dripping granite ledges that were slippery as glass. Joe chanced the peril of a broken neck and cracked-up limbs. Somewhere down in Black Thunder Basin was his partner. And from the trap he had just escaped, it appeared that Bill needed help. That hen he was setting had apparently hatched out a nest full of rattlesnakes.

The black slid down the last steep pitch, and fled through a tangle of briars and willows that slashed Joe's lean face like so many whips. He rode unheeding, for now, high above, he heard the clang of steel on rocks and knew that his backtrail was hot with pursuit.

Into the shallows of Black Thunder Creek he forced his snorting pony, jerking his carbine from the scabbard to prevent water getting to it, as the horse lost its footing in a deep pool and began to swim. As the dripping mount clawed up the opposite bank where trampled grass and brush indicated a stock crossing, a riderless pony crashed out of a choke-cherry thicket and flashed past Joe before he could check its flight.

But Joe knew the horse. Bill Mulvane had ridden that pony into northern Wyoming. Now it ran with an empty saddle!

Joe hustled down the backtrail. His lips felt stiff and his heart hammered inside him. What about Bill Mulvane? What had that string of gunshots he had heard meant—that first warning that had sent him galloping out of a closing trap? The fog had lifted in the face of a cold breeze which rolled down from the peaks. The red line above the eastern divide was thicker now, like the trace of a badly wounded bull elk through the forest. Day was breaking and with it—hell!

Across his course, as his black galloped through a grove of towering cottonwoods, tottered a man who trailed a rifle. Even as Joe swung back sharply on his bridle reins, this stranger in his path flung up an arm. Then, with a hoarse shout, almost before Joe had stopped, he pitched over on his face.

From down the trail came the splash of horses emerging from the creek. Dis-

garding that, Joe was out of his saddle and at the side of the man who now lay sprawled on the ground. It was Bill Mulvane. He had been shot through the body.

"Bill," Joe pleaded. "How did they get yuh—"

Bill opened a pair of glazing eyes. He looked up into his partner's set and warlike face. "Big gun," croaked Bill. "From somewhere around that cabin—" His voice failed. Then with an effort that sent tremors through the whole slack length of his body, he spoke again. "Young McHale—"

There was no time to give first aid to Bill Mulvane. Somewhere ahead a cabin offered cover for a standoff fight . . .

Chapter II

THE GIRL AND THE GUN

JOE shouldered his unconscious partner. By the crackling strength of his wide shoulders and sinewy arms, he flung the limp body across the saddle. Forty feet of lariat, snatched from its strap on the horn, skilfully half-hitched around trailing legs and arms, anchored Bill to the black.

Across the tiny park, a tight knot of riders broke into sight. They were not fifty yards away. In the lead galloped a man whose spurs flashed in the increasing light. Joe Jones snapped his carbine to his shoulder, and fired almost before his chin had plunked down against the brown stock. A horse went down, and Tim Yawkey was thrown the length of his bridle reins.

Joe raced his rifle lever, pumped another slug that broke the nerve of the pursuit. They whirled their horses, galloping for cover, while Tim Yawkey, dazedly scrambling toward a rotted stump like a broken-legged beetle, yelled for help.

Joe swung up behind his saddle, took a close grip on his reins, and bending forward across Bill's bouncing body to anchor it, he spurred away in hot retreat. There was no time now to make a try at getting Tim Yawkey. Bill needed help. His shirt front was red and wet.

Ahead, in a small meadow, loomed the huddle of buildings and pole corrals that indicated Cayuse McHale's mountain home. Joe Jones headed his black for the long cabin by the creek, though he knew

that even now rifles might be lining on him. Bill had been watching that place. Or at least Joe suspected that from his partner's last words.

But now Bill needed help that couldn't be given in the open. He needed plenty of hot water, and clean rags for bullet hole pads. And Joe Jones was the only man within a hundred miles to offer that help.

The black raced into an open area between the two sections of the cabin. It was a wet weather shelter for wagons and ranch equipment. A wagon stood there now. Joe wheeled his pony around the vehicle as a gun smashed a bullet from the fringe of trees which flanked the ranch meadow.

Knocking his reins around the spokes of a wheel, Joe dragged Bill from the saddle, and flung himself against a door that led from the wagon shelter into one section of the cabin. The door wasn't barred, and Joe almost measured his length on the floor. Off balance, handicapped by Bill's dead weight in his arms, he stood swaying in the doorway. A sharp command straightened him.

"Don't come a foot nearer. Or I'll kill you!"

Joe was looking into the barrel of a Colt. Behind that gun he saw a white-faced girl whose blue eyes glinted like bits of mountain agate. Again a rifle smashed from the edge of the clearing, Joe's black reared as the bullet clanged off an iron wagon tire.

"Ma'am," Joe Jones whispered desperately. "My partner's hurt bad. If we don't—"

Her whisper broke him off. She lowered her gun. "Come in then—fast. And bar that door!"

EVEN as Joe obeyed, balancing Bill's limp body over one shoulder while he slammed the stout wooden bar into its slot, he took stock of his surroundings and especially of the girl who had so grimly greeted him with a huge .45.

She was neither tall nor short. She was that in-between height which is most becoming to beauty. Her wavy, flaxen hair fell about her shoulders, and a mountain tan blended with the red of her smooth cheeks. Somehow her red lips seemed made

more for smiling than for being drawn into such a tight, despairing line.

She wore the rough garments of a mountain girl, a short skirt of corduroy and scuffed high heeled boots, but the gay red waist she wore and the silver-studded carved-leather belt about her slim middle, at once set her apart as being different.

This part of the cabin, Joe decided, as his eyes reluctantly left the girl, was the kitchen. A rusty stove was in one corner, and a gingham curtain partially hid shelves of granite-ware dishes above it. A cupboard was in another corner.

Just above the door he had barred, there was a set of elk antlers, designed as a rack for guns. One long gun hung there now, an old-timer, Joe decided, of the black powder variety. It was at least a .45-.90—a buffalo gun designed to knock down, with its finger-long cartridge, a shaggy bull at six hundred yards range.

The girl didn't give Joe much time for inspection. She had rushed to a bed roll lying against the wall, and had shaken out a tarpaulin and blankets.

"Only bed handy," she said crisply. "There'll be no chance to get into the other part of the cabin. Those men out there—" And she nodded her head significantly.

"Who are they?" Joe asked a moment later, as he lowered Bill onto a spread of Hudson Bay four point blankets.

Bitterly she answered. "I don't know. But from the way a half dozen of them chased one lone man, I'd take them for some of Gibbs' riders, men of the Cross Ten crew."

Kneeling over his partner, Joe slashed away Bill's sodden shirt with swift rips of his knife. He paused momentarily to look up into the girl's blazing eyes. "Gibbs?" he said slowly. "I always thought ol' Abe was honest. He was rich. Yes, and a shrewd dealer. But not a thief."

"You're a stranger in the basin," she answered. "At least, I've never seen you before. You mustn't believe all you hear. My father built this cabin here thirty years ago. He fought the Indians to hold his land, and he raised horses and cattle. He was never much of a business man, but he made an honest living until men like Gibbs came in later to reap the benefits from the pioneers who broke the land.

Gibbs wants our land. He wants it cheap. My father will not sell. So Gibbs has hired his gunmen, and stolen our horses and our cattle."

Her hot words ceased. Tears came into her eyes. "And not satisfied with that, they have tried to kill dad."

"Yore dad?" Joe repeated.

She answered. "They call him Cayuse McHale. He's in the other part of the cabin with a bullet through one leg. The shot broke the bone. He's old. He may never ride again." With that, she went to the stove and picked up the tea-kettle to pour out the hot water which was now ready.

Joe was tearing a clean dish towel into long strips. He had bared Bill's chest and marked the blue hole of the bullet wound high up under the right collar bone. It was a bad injury but luckily the slug hadn't penetrated the chest nor hit his lungs. Bill had always been a clean living man. With care and rest, he stood a good chance of pulling through.

The McHale girl helped all she could. She spoke no more of her family troubles. Once, as Joe watched her skilful fingers carefully and tenderly padding Bill's wound, he tried to re-open the subject.

"Who shot yore dad? When did it happen?"

"A Gibbs gunman shot him off his horse yesterday when he was rounding up the lower pasture. He crawled a quarter mile to reach home. I'm certain it was a Gibbs man. We have no other enemies."

Joe wished to ask the girl her name. But since she hadn't offered to tell him voluntarily, and since she hadn't inquired as to his, he had no opportunity to do so.

"This man you call your partner," she said, as they finished strapping up Bill's shoulder, "is a Gibbs rider. I've seen him following the Cross Ten wagon."

"No, he's not a Cross Ten man," Joe was going to say, but then he considered otherwise. The code of his service forbade him betraying a man on the job. She hated Cross Ten men but it would have to remain that way until the whole deal had been played out. Besides, hadn't Abe Gibbs charged the Cayuse McHale outfit, in turn, with cattle and horse raids?

"A queer kettle of fish," sighed Joe Jones.

SHE heard his remark, and looked deeply into his tanned face with her clear blue eyes. Her lips trembled quizzically. She was wondering just what connection lay between the wounded Gibbs puncher and this tall, rawboned pilgrim, with grey eyes and sandy hair. She knew the strong bonds that friendship built up between range riders; and she had seen Joe Jones dare gunfire to carry this man to shelter, and then stand boldly before her hostile gun and plead for his life.

"I threw that gun on you," she said gently, "because I thought you might be part of the Gibbs gang. I've been standing guard hours in this cabin since my dad came in. It's been a wild night."

He saw now, as the morning light grew in the cabin, the lines of weariness in her face and the white look around her mouth. This shack, which had become the focal point of a bitter range war, was no place for a girl—even a mountain girl.

That reminded him of the riflemen out in the timber. They had been quiet since the firing of that last salvo of bullets, as he battered open the door. He strode toward a front window. For the moment he forgot caution.

A rifle spat smoke. A bullet drilled a star-shaped hole through the window pane. It entered, not six inches from where his head had appeared as he looked out. Dim forms were moving in the thin underbrush that grew along the edge of the cottonwood grove. They were mounted men, apparently, but they were moving about like prowling Indians.

"They are still on deck," he told the girl as he stepped back from danger.

The sound of the shot had aroused Bill Mulvane from his delirium. For the moment, sanity had cleared the fog of pain from his brain, and he sat up in his blankets.

"The big gun," he cried out. "Joe—where are you?" And with that he crumpled back upon the bedding.

In a moment, Joe was at his side. The girl brought a tin cup filled with cold creek water to cool the fever that had turned Bill's eyes bright and glassy.

"He keeps talkin' about a big gun," whispered Joe. "Somebody must have dry-gulched him with one. That was a good-sized hole he got under his collar bone. I've seen the same in bull elk that have been knocked down by black powder guns."

As he spoke, he turned and looked up at the elk antlers. He arose, walked over, and with one swift movement swept the heavy weapon from off its support. It fell into his hands. He turned around then and saw the girl braced against the farther wall like a lioness at bay. She had retrieved her big sixgun and she held it now.

"That gun's our property. Put it back where it belongs."

He stood grim-faced, unyielding. "The barrel's warm. It's been fired recently. My partner keeps talkin' about bein' shot with a big gun. And I found him wounded not far from this place . . ."

He checked abruptly. The almost unbelievable thought had come to him that this slim girl had fired the shot that wounded Bull Mulvane. All the evidence pointed toward that conclusion.

Joe's line of duty was clear. He must arrest this blue-eyed girl. But never before had he been faced with such a task. Men he would arrest, yes. And face their guns to do it! But a girl . . .

And then he looked down, staring with hard eyes at the flushed, pain-wracked face of his wounded partner. That decided him. Carefully he leaned the old gun against the wall near the door.

"Ma'am," he said coldly, "I'm an officer. I'm forced to ask you to lay down that Colt. You are under arrest."

Chapter III

CORNERED!

HE started toward her, not bothering to reach for the sixgun that swung from his belt. He walked across the room, his unwavering gray eyes fixed upon her set, determined face. From a chaps pocket, he had taken a pair of glittering cuffs.

"Not a step nearer," she said fiercely. "Not one step. I didn't kill him. You can't—" And then, resolutely, she pitched up her gun, lining it with a steady hand.

Joe heard the heavy hammer click as she cocked it. Yet he walked toward her, disdaining to draw a gun. He knew little

enough about women, but from what little he did know, he felt sure she would never pull the trigger.

"You coward," she half sobbed. "I gave you shelter. Helped you to take care of my enemy—this Gibbs man."

"He isn't a Gibbs man. He's an officer." The time was past for concealment, impossible as it was to believe that this girl was allied with Cayuse McHale and the outlaw bunch of Black Thunder Basin.

Outside sounded a sudden volley. Then, booming on the hard-beaten ground between cabin and the cottonwoods, Joe Jones heard the approach of hard-running ponies.

"They're charging the house!" he shouted. Then, dropping the handcuffs, he went to his knees, he raked out his sixgun.

A line of riders was heading full tilt across the meadow. The mist had cleared away with the mounting sun. Visibility was good enough now for a battle.

Joe Jones longed for his Winchester. But the carbine was outside the house in his saddle scabbard.

It looked like a finish fight. He was cornered by the gang outside; and inside to help him were—a half dead partner and a yellow-haired girl he couldn't trust! For all he knew, the girl would shoot him through the back as he knelt by the window . . .

A bullet bored its way through the pane. Weakened by the first slug's drive, the glass gave way with a crash. Joe lifted his sixgun and with one wide sweep cleared away the jagged splinters.

The big weapon clanged its charge, as the half dozen yelling riders swept in. Tim Yawkey was in the lead, howling like an Indian, and rolling his silver-mounted spurs.

"Tim's got him another horse," Joe decided grimly. "Wish I could see what that hombre looks like."

But even now there wasn't anything about Tim, except his spurs, that would distinguish him from a dozen or a hundred tall and lanky horsemen. He rode with his hat pulled down and his sheepskin collar rolled up.

"Got to kill him, I reckon, to identify him," Joe grunted. And he lined on

Yawkey, but without luck at the fifty yards range.

Back in the woods, dismounted riflemen were pumping lead to cover the charge of their mates: The leaden hail beat against the front of the cabin.

Blue smoke curled up inside the room. Bill began to cough as he lay in his blankets, crying out in agony. Joe's gun hammer clicked on an empty cylinder. He reached for the spare cartridges that he had ripped from his belt and placed them, end up, on the floor, for quicker reloading.

Then he became aware that his ears were ringing with the crashing discharge of a nearby gun. He saw a pony pitch over and the rider hurtle from leather as Yawkey's bold rush neared the cabin. Joe glanced down the room. At the other front window, knelt the yellow-haired daughter of Cayuse McHale, handling the old buffalo gun. Though the recoil made her slim shoulder quiver, she steadied the long barrel on the sill and dealt out lead.

YAWKEY and his men raced up to within ten yards of the cabin. Desperately, Joe Jones stood up, and leaning out the broken window, he lined his hot gun and tried to knock the lanky traitor from leather.

But luck was with Tim Yawkey. His wall-eyed pony, darting to the flank, carried Tim out of sight around the cabin just as Joe emptied his gun. His men trailed him, swung around in their saddles, blazing away at the face in the window.

Whang! The buffalo gun let go. A rider reeled back, barely saved himself by feebly clutching his saddle horn as the animal carried him out of the fight.

The attack was over as quickly as it had started. And then there was only the dead pony out on the flat, wavering streamers of smoke drifting up to blend with the cold fog, and the yellow dust kicked up by the ponies:

McHale's girl, the danger past, drooped forlornly over her old black powder rifle. Joe Jones first crammed live loads into his sixgun, then lurched stiffly toward her. Now, with the battle flame dying in his lean body, he felt as stiff and cold as if he had just emerged from a blizzard. Gently he raised her, his hands rather shaky

as they gripped her trembling shoulders.

From the doorway a harsh voice croaked, "Take yore damn hands off my gal!"

Joe Jones whirled, saw a red-eyed old man standing in the door that led from the wagon shelter. He was tall and grizzled and thin as a rail. A mat of grey whiskers hung down over his red undershirt, and the tops of linsey woolsey pants were stuffed into cowhide boots. His suspenders trailed on the floor.

The old man's knees shook with weakness. Jones saw that his right leg was swathed with bandages and that pine board splints protruded from the top of the wrappings. He was leaning on a long rifle, using it as a crutch. But there wasn't anything shaky about the worn, long-barreled Colt that he held lined on Joe.

Even as Joe whirled and dropped to the floor, the old man's gun cracked. The bullet almost parted Joe Jones' hair.

He lay flat on the floor, gripping a gun filled with live loads. He didn't like to kill a cripple, or the father of the yellow-haired girl, but it looked like the only way out. And then the McHale girl, dropping her buffalo gun with a crash, flung herself across the room and clamped down on her father's gun arm with both hands.

"A damn Gibbs killer!" McHale was squalling in a raspy, high-pitched voice. "Layin' hands on my gal!"

"Dad!" the girl screamed. "Drop that gun! He's not a Gibbs man. He's an officer. He's here to arrest me!"

"Arrest my Sally? Tuh hell with him!" Cayuse McHale started forward, but his rifle crutch gave way, and he went down with a crash. His daughter bent over and wrested away his sixgun.

Joe Jones got up from the floor and wiped the moisture off his brow. This Black Thunder country was hard to figure. "Thanks, ma'am," he said earnestly. "I'd have hated to down yore ol' dad."

"Small chance you had," she said scornfully, watching him with bright, hot eyes.

Then the doorway suddenly became crowded with men. One stood out, a huge figure with drooping handle-bar mustache.

Joe Jones leaped to throw himself between Sally McHale and the strangers. In despair, he believed them to be part of

the Yawkey gang who had crept up unobserved as he had engaged in the encounter with Cayuse. But as he swept up his six-gun, the big man with the longhorn mustache roared in a bullfrog bass:

"What's goin' on here? Git up, McHale, and talk fast. Tell me why a Cross Ten horse lays dead in yore front yard. Talk fast, yuh ol' reprobate. Shore as my name's Abe Gibbs, I'll git to the bottom of this, or hang yuh all to the nearest cottonwood tree."

JOE JONES stepped back, lowering his gun. Behind the stocky form of Abe Gibbs, two Colt barrels were covering every person in the cabin.

Gibbs stood a moment surveying the room and its occupants, the pilgrim standing by the center table, the yellow-haired girl kneeling on the floor, her arm supporting the grizzled head of her father. Cayuse McHale, although he couldn't walk far, still possessed, strongly, the power of speech.

"Gibbs!" he snapped. "The best day yuh ever lived, neither you nor yore white-livered hired gunfighters could ever put fear in the heart of a McHale. Git yore damned rope!"

"Shut up, yuh ol' hoss-thief!" Abe roared, stumping into the cabin. "Shut up or one of my boys'll put a bullet through yore mouth. I got yuh dead to rights. Yuh just killed one of my ponies outside! You've stole five hundred more in the last year!"

Sally McHale sprang up, confronted the burly cattle king. Her eyes blazed. "You mountain bully! Would you hang a man with a broken leg?"

"Broken leg?" Gibbs frowned. "How did he bust it?"

"You should know. One of your human coyotes shot him off his hoss."

Gibbs flushed beet red, laid a furious hand on the girl's shoulder. "Are you accusin' me of dry gulchin', yuh mountain wildcat?" he rasped.

Two of Gibbs' men had followed through the door. Now they stood grinning as their chief faced the white-faced girl, whose blue eyes flashed with fight.

Joe took a long step toward Gibbs.

One gunman—a bowlegged rider with beady black eyes closely set above a

broken nose—snapped, "Pilgrim, stand yore ground!"

His mate, a wiry-whiskered fellow in Angora goat chaps, laughed approvingly and said, "Jaybird, if you'll wing him in the gun arm, I'll take the left."

"That would be a pleasure, Ed," growled Jaybird.

Joe Jones stopped abruptly, let his gun drop to the floor. He had reached a kitchen chair and lightly he laid his left hand on the back while he held up his right as a sign that he had discarded his weapon.

Disregarding the two gunfighters, he spoke quietly to Abe Gibbs. "That girl is my prisoner. Don't lay a hand on her."

Gibbs whirled, stepping away from Sally to regard with amazement this unarmed man who was now issuing orders.

"Yore prisoner?" he boomed. "What's yore authority?"

"I'm an agent of the protective association. That's my partner over ag'in' the wall. He's bad hurt, packin' lead from a big caliber gun—that one leanin' against the wall, I believe."

Gibbs turned and picked up the old buffalo gun. He sniffed the barrel, then turned accusing eyes on Joe Jones.

"A slug from somethin' about this size killed that hoss of mine. Now yuh claim to be a stock detective, and say Mulvane's yore partner. Well," Gibbs stuck out his jaw, "you got to prove you're an association man and not one of these damned Black Thunder thieves. Show yore star or yore papers. Mulvane showed his when he talked to me a week ago."

Chapter IV

THE CRAZY COLT

JOE JONES knew he couldn't prove by star or papers that he was an officer. Bill Mulvane could have identified him, but Bill lay delirious. Joe had not dared wear a badge.

"Gibbs," Joe answered, deadly quiet, "ask yore men to come into the room. I can't show a star, but if you really want to clean up on the rustlers, you got to believe me."

Gibbs laughed harshly. "Seems like I've

about got my clean-up right now. I've got you, a fake cattle detective, this hellcat of a girl, and Cayuse McHale. Only one I lack is the old man's boy, that kid that they call the Crazy Colt." He glared at Sally, who stood defiant beside her father. "Where's yore brother?"

"Find him," the girl snapped.

"And' while yo're lookin'," Joe Jones added, "find a lanky hombre named Tim Yawkey who wears silver-mounted spurs an' claims to ride for yore outfit."

"I never heard of Yawkey!" shouted Gibbs. "It's just another of yore fool stories to keep from stretchin' hemp. But I'm a fair man." He turned to bowlegged Jaybird. "Step out," he ordered, "an' see if Walt has showed up yet. See if he ever heard tell of a bird named Tim Yawkey who wears silver-mounted spurs and is supposed to draw pay from me."

Jaybird nodded, and backed out the door. Abe Gibbs explained, in surly fashion, "Walt's my foreman. He knows every rider within a hundred miles."

Sally McHale rapped out, "Walt Flanders is the biggest scoundrel unhung in Wyoming."

"What!" the cattleman roared, amazed. "That from a McHale? Where do yuh git such ideas?"

But Sally wouldn't explain. She merely moved nearer her groaning father and stood waiting for Walt Flanders, her hands resting on her hips.

Jaybird stumped in, with a grin on his blocky face and a sparkle in his black eyes. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "The chuckwagon jest rolled in. Walt an' some of the boys was with it. Seems like they found a bunch of critters at the north end of the basin. Walt's comin'."

Spurs rang on the threshold and a moment later a tall man appeared at the door. He seemed a quiet person, and he was dressed all in black. A sixgun with black rubber hilt was stuffed in his holster. As Flanders stood there, the trace of a grin on his thin-lipped mouth, he reminded Joe Jones, somehow, of a crow.

"This man," Gibbs said gruffly, pointing toward Joe, "claims to be an association man, and a partner of Bill Mulvane. But he don't wear no star. He swears a long-geared hound named Tim

Yawkey, a puncher wearin' silver-mounted spurs, got him an' Bill into all this mess."

Flanders sauntered into the room, the slim fingers of his right hand twisting one corner of the black mustache that shadowed his thin mouth. He glanced at Joe, then looked down at his own boots, adorned with rusted goose-neck spurs.

"Black Thunder punchers," drawled Flanders, "are too damn poor to buy silver-mounted spurs. Wages have been cut since the rustlers started bustin' good outfits like the Cross Ten. As for a gent named Yawkey, I've never heard tell of the same."

Gibbs frowned. Then he said to Jaybird, "Bar the door! Don't let anybody else come in. This man may have some-thing to say. I'll give him a chance to talk."

But Flanders interrupted as Jaybird obeyed. "Why waste time, Abe? Seems like you got all the dope you need on this Cayuse bunch. They tried to kill Mulvane because he was gittin' too near 'em. Mebbe they brought him into this cabin, holding him prisoner until we come along."

"How do you explain the Cross Ten hoss layin' dead outside?" asked Joe.

Flanders jeered. "Mulvane had borrowed extry hosses from Abe. That pony was part of his string."

"If so," Joe said quickly, "the rustlers stole it from Bill. For when I found him, it was because I had spotted his own private hoss stampedin' toward the crick—a hoss that he bought down near Chugwater."

GIBBS listened intently. But Flanders was now running things. "The boys outside," drawled Flanders, "told me that they was camped a mile up the valley. They heard heavy gunfire. That's what brought 'em down here."

"Didn't you hear it?" asked Joe.

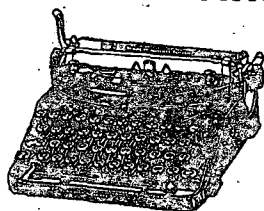
Flanders hesitated, but Gibbs spoke for him: "Walt was away on my business. He had thrown in with Bill Mulvane to night ride, hopin' they might pick up the rustlers' trail."

"When Bill was ambushed," Joe taunt-

(Continued on page 116)

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BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 115)

ed, "yore foreman was apparently at a damned safe distance."

Flanders' lean face flushed red. He stepped toward Joe, raised his right hand and dealt the sandy-haired rider an open-handed slap across the mouth. Joe Jones, gray eyes suddenly furious, whipped up the chair on which he had been leaning. With one swing, he knocked Flanders' legs from under him. As Flanders crashed to the floor, Gibbs and his gunmen leaped forward.

Joe dropped almost to his knees, pitched the chair across the floor, and Gibbs went down with a howl as it struck him full in the paunch. Stocky Jaybird, a foot behind his boss, fell over his cursing chief. Yellow-whiskered Ed dodged to the side to clear his line for a heart shot at Joe.

Cayuse McHale raised a cracked yell. "Go after 'em, kid!"

As Joe knocked down Gibbs with the chair, he dropped to the floor, flung a long leg over Walt Flanders' writhing form and sought to wrest away the latter's sixgun. His own lay near the table, out of quick reach.

Flanders, underneath Joe, was waging a bitter fight. His black eyes blazed and his breath was hot on Joe's face as they struggled for the sixgun. Joe clamped his fingers around Walt's wrist, as the latter sought to bring down the barrel for a bullet drive through Joe's body.

Ed came cat-footing around the tangle of arms and legs where his boss and Jaybird had fallen. He side-stepped Sally, who had backed to the wall as the fight flared up, standing guard over her crippled father.

Flanders shouted hoarsely, "Git this hoss-thief off me!" He flung up his left hand. Fingers like the talons of a vulture dug suddenly into Joe Jones' throat and shut off his wind.

Ed bent at the knees, the stance of the professional gunman. "Hold him steady, Walt!" he croaked. "Long enough fer one hot slug!"

"Don't give him the chance, feller!" whooped Cayuse McHale, and he tried to stand up on his tottery legs. Promptly they gave way, and he came down with a terrific crash that was followed by another as the stove-pipe fell. Two joints of the pipe struck the old pioneer on the head.

A PILGRIM VOLUNTEERS—TO DIE!

A cloud of black soot rolled up, then settled down on the battlers. Abe Gibbs, just emerging from beneath Jaybird's heavy weight, gasped and tried to mop the black stuff off his face. Jaybird, half dazed, was tossed aside and lay groaning.

Ed was still poised for a shot. Walt Flanders, heeding the plea for a steady hold on Joe, had gouged deeper with his strangling fingers. . . .

THE world turned red and black before Joe's eyes. But grimly, even with heart hammering against his ribs and lungs laboring like a blacksmith's bellows, the association rider maintained his desperate grip on Flanders' gun arm.

Sally McHale, blue eyes flashing, bent and picked up a stick of firewood. Abe Gibbs, pawing around on the floor for his gun, saw the girl's rush toward Ed as the latter lined his sixgun on Joe.

"Ed!" the cattleman yelled. "Look out for the hellcat!"

Ed, startled, turned his head. He was not in time to dodge, but at least it saved him from a fatal fracture, for all the young strength of Sally McHale was in the blow she aimed at Ed's egg-shaped skull with her chunk of cedar.

Whack! The terrific smash landed squarely on Ed's pointed chin. It was like a mustang's kick. Ed broke at the knees, fell face forward and hit the floor with a loud crash, overturning, as he fell, a set of shelves that came down on his limp form in a shower of granite-ware plates, cups, and tinware. Ed sprawled out under the pile, and not even a tremor ran through his lean frame.

Startled at his silence, and believing that she had killed him, Sally drew away from the man on the floor, dropped her stick of firewood. Then tears came to her eyes and she began to weep.

But old McHale boomed out, "That's the gal fer my money!"

Her interference had given Joe the chance for life that he needed. Flanders, hearing the awful crash as Ed fell, briefly relaxed his strangle hold. Joe flung back his head, and wrenched his throat out of Flanders' crushing grip. Bringing over his left hand, he seized Flanders' sixgun by the barrel, and jerked away.

Old Cayuse McHale, crawling across the

(Continued on page 118)

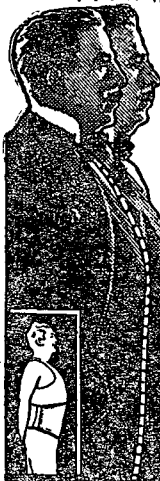
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BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 117)

kitchen floor, found Ed's sixgun. He flung it down on Abe Gibbs as the latter, up on his boots now, aimed a kick at Joe Jones' bent back.

"Stand hitched, Abel!" rasped Cayuse.

Flanders jumped up, right fist swinging for a crack at Joe's chin. Out of patience, Joe Jones slapped Flanders with six inches of Colt barrel. And Walt went down to stay.

The fight ended with Joe Jones turning slowly to line the foreman's sixgun on any other battlers, Cayuse with the cold drop on Abe Gibbs, and three Cross Ten warriors sprawled out on the floor. . . .

There was, of course, a weeping girl crouched against the wall with a stout piece of red cedar fallen at her feet. As Joe Jones started toward her, he heard the crash of gun butts against the door that led from the wagon shelter. There came the shouts of Gibbs' men:

"Open up! Or we'll burn down the place!"

Joe Jones stopped dead in his tracks. There, on the floor, was the pair of steel handcuffs that he had jerked earlier to snap on Sally's wrists. With a grin, he picked them up, walked over to Abe Gibbs, and before the cattleman could protest, he locked them on his big-boned wrists.

"For interferin' with an officer," said Joe Jones. Then, turning to those who battered against the door, "Stand hitched or I'll beef yore boss."

The door of the cupboard against the rear wall opened. A man stepped out. He was young, and his blond hair stood on end like the fur of an angry cat. His blue eyes blazed like those of Sally McHale.

"You will if I don't beef him first," this newcomer said, raising his sixgun.

Gibbs yelled and rushed toward Joe. "Protect me!" he cried. "That's McHale's son, the Crazy Colt. He'll kill me sure."

"Yo're-damn tootin'," snarled the Crazy Colt, and he thumbed his gun hammer.

Chapter V

FIGHTING BLOOD

BY official oath, Joe Jones was sworn to protect his prisoners, so he flung Gibbs behind him, shielding him with his own body from the Crazy Colt's fire, as

A PILGRIM VOLUNTEERS—TO DIE!

he shouted for the youth to put up his gun.

Just as the Crazy Colt's gun cracked, Sally sprang across the room, and the cedar stick, rapping smartly on the boy's right wrist, knocked down the weapon so that the heavy bullet tore into the floor.

That wasn't all. The blow so numbed the Crazy Colt's right hand that his fingers went limp and his smoking weapon fell from his grip. Furiously he turned on his sister, holding his wrist and gritting his teeth against the shafts of pain that shot the length of his arm.

"Gibbs was right," he panted. "You are a hellcat. Damn you, he—he needed killin'!"

But he didn't frighten Sally. She set a trim boot on her brother's gun where it lay on the floor and in a moment Joe Jones had rushed up and rammed his gun barrel against the Crazy Colt's short ribs.

"There's been enough killing on Black Thunder Creek," stormed Sally. "Two old men, who were friends forty years ago in Texas, now steal each other's horses, hire hoodlums to wreck homes with murder guns, and turn life into a red hell where it should be one of peace. And you—"

The Crazy Colt wilted under the hot fire of words that now poured from his wrathful sister. Joe Jones, stepping back to allow Sally full play, noted that the boy had a weak chin, and that there were black lines under his eyes.

"Aw, Sally," the Crazy Colt was pleading. "I—I'm no hoss-thief or killer like Gibbs an' his bunch. You know what made me mad? It was the way they ambushed poor ol' dad yesterday. There was a chance to get Gibbs this mornin', so I took the ol' gun—"

Joe Jones pricked up his ears.

"Shut up," snapped Sally. "You talk too much."

Heavy thudding at the door indicated that the last gunshot had stirred up the Cross Ten outfit. The stout panels were beginning to crack and quiver.

Abe Gibbs stood glowering, his hands cuffed in front of him. "My boys," he rasped, "have found a wagon tongue. They'll bust in that door. When they do, it'll be you're finish."

Joe Jones swung away from Sally,

(Continued on page 120)

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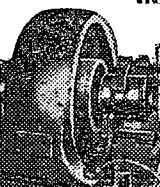
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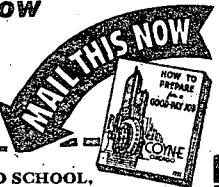
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(Continued from page 119)

strolled to the yielding door, snapped an order. "Yore boss is safe, but under arrest. Get away from this door!"

There followed an instant of silence, then a man yelled, "To hell with the boss! We're comin' in!"

"For the last time," answered Joe, "I'm warnin' you."

Cra-ash! The battering ram ripped into the door, splitting a lower panel.

"You asked for it," snapped Joe. And shoving his Colt barrel against the inch-wide crack, he ran out a string of lead.

The big gun bounced in his grip. Blue smoke curled up. Outside, a man cried in sudden pain. Then there was the thud of retreating boots.

Suddenly a heavy weight smashed down on Joe's back. Abe Gibbs had struck savagely, hoping to crack open Joe's skull with the taut stretch of steel chain that ran between his cuffs.

Sally McHale pounced on Abe Gibbs. She crooked her strong young arm under the jut of the cattleman's chin, almost strangling him as he slashed savagely but blindly at Joe's jerking head.

Given an opportunity for the moment, Joe whipped from under Gibbs' crushing weight, and taking the man by the scruff of his neck, threw him the length of the kitchen. He landed with a crash against the cupboard from which the Crazy Colt had emerged.

Outside the cabin, a rattling volley of gunfire sent soft-nosed bullets boring into the log walls. Cayuse McHale, crawling across the floor with his sixgun gripped for action, flung himself down under the broken window. He lined the weapon, and whooped his war song as he ran out a cylinder full of lead.

"Come on, yuh hoss stealin' devils!" Cayuse howled. "The McHale's will be here tuh greet yuh!"

"We got to get away from here," snapped Joe. "If they raid the cabin, they'll be blind mad. There'll be no talkin' to 'em."

"I'll show you the way," whispered Sally.

SHE led him to the cupboard, threw wide the narrow door. Behind a rack full of clothing, there was a black, shadowy opening.

A PILGRIM VOLUNTEERS—TO DIE!

"When my dad built this cabin," she explained, "there were more Indians around than there are now. Settlers stood every chance of having their cabins burned down by fire arrows. Most of them used to build tunnels like this so they could escape getting roasted alive. This one leads down to brush along the creek. We never used it until today."

When she said that, she looked at her brother who was now crouched beside his father, handling a sixgun with his left hand.

Joe nodded. "I understand plenty. Yore brother reached the cabin a few minutes before me. He was carrying that buffalo gun. You shoved him into the cupboard so he could escape by the tunnel. You stopped me with yore gun so he'd have time to get away. But—but he came back."

She nodded wearily. "That's it. And now—if we get clear of this—you'll arrest him on charges of attempted murder."

It was clear to Joe that she believed her brother had ambushed and wounded Bill Mulvane. "First," said Joe, "we got to get clear. We've got two crippled men on our hands."

Sally snatched the tarpaulin off Bill's bed. "Two of you carry the tarp," she said. "Like a hammock. I'll lead through the tunnel. My dad can walk if somebody will hold him up on his weak side."

There wasn't time to lose. The Cross Ten gang would break into the cabin before many more minutes had passed.

Joe would have liked to herd Flanders, Jaybird, and Ed along, but the three were still unconscious. Acting as rearguard, he helped old Cayuse, who was protesting bitterly against turning his homestead over to a pack of barn burning hounds.

Sally held a lantern aloft as she guided through the tunnel. The darkness was almost impenetrable.

The Crazy Colt carried the front end of the tarp on which Bill lay in his blankets. Abe Gibbs, his cuffs temporarily discarded, held the rear. Abe didn't like this job of aiding the McHales to flee from his own outfit, but he had been roughly used and his spirits were low.

The tunnel wasn't long, but the exit was cunningly hidden in the midst of a thick tangle of bullberry brush near the

(Continued on page 122)

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(Continued from page 121)

creek. Down logs, mossy with age, would serve as barricades against bullets if the Cross 'Ten warriors discovered the fugitives as they emerged.

"I closed the cupboard door," Joe told Sally. "It'll be some time before they figure out where we went. They'll waste time searching the house. Flanders, Ed, and Jaybird won't be much help to 'em."

Sally nodded. Her face was white and set.

"I got three or four hosses hid along the crick," the Crazy Colt said. "There's some saddles an' such along with 'em."

"Horses?" Sally asked sharply. "Why have you ridden horses down here?"

The Crazy Colt lowered his eyes. "Aw," he muttered, "you wouldn't understand."

Joe Jones, gray eyes alert, watching every movement of the youngster, noted suddenly that the Crazy Colt wasn't wearing spurs. "You won't get far on a Western horse," he said, "without hooks."

He saw also that the sides of the boy's boots were bright where metal had rubbed against the leather. Why then, wasn't the Crazy Colt wearing spurs now?

Joe Jones' mind flashed back to the picture of tall Yawkey, the double-crosser, who had almost led him into a trap. He hadn't seen Yawkey's face. Was this boy, this brother of Sally McHale, the traitor who had arranged the ambush of Bill Mulvane, led Joe into it, then discarded silver-mounted spurs because they might later identify him?

As Joe Jones stepped stiffly toward the Crazy Colt, the fellow slipped into the brush and wriggled out of sight.

Sally McHale, white to the lips said, "He has gone for horses."

She knew, and Joe knew too, that horses weren't hidden in brush by honest men. Those ponies had been placed there for a purpose. And it was obvious that this foggy morning was the best sort of weather for rustling.

Abe Gibbs understood that too, and he grunted, with a sidelong glance at Joe. "That fool kid shore tipped his mitt then."

SALLY turned on him fiercely. "My brother's not a thief."

Gibbs rasped, "What fer is he hidin' out hosses, then, on a day like this? On

A PILGRIM VOLUNTEERS—TO DIE!

a day when it's plumb foggy, an' easy to run a bunch of stolen stock down Black Thunder Canyon. Yore place here is right at the mouth of the canyon. Mulvane told me yesterday of pickin' up pony tracks on the canyon trail, as if a scout had gone ahead to clear away any trees that might have blocked the way of the drive."

"So you were all watching the McHale cabin?" Sally asked slowly. Her blue eyes went from red-faced Gibbs to Joe.

"A damn good place to watch," growled Gibbs. "An' the clean-up would have been complete if this pilgrim," he nodded toward Joe, "hadn't busted up things. Now the way's clear for rustlers. Flanders is knocked out. Mulvane's bad hurt. And I'm—I'm under arrest!"

"Yes, you are under arrest," Joe confirmed. "What about it?"

"Jest this. When this play is over, I'll check up on you. If you are an officer, I got weight enough at Cheyenne to take away yore star. An', boy, I'll shore take it away. I'm goin' to blacklist you all over the West as a knot-headed, swaybacked cuss that goes hog wild when a pair of blue eyes works on him."

Joe Jones gasped. For the first time it came to him that the girl had really interfered strongly today with what he conceived as duty. He had arrested the most powerful stockman on Black Thunder Creek, and he had passed up the opportunity to clamp the cuffs on young McHale, who loomed as a horse-thief, and as the ambusher of Bill Mulvane.

Then, heavy on the damp air, Joe sniffed the taint of wood smoke. "They've set fire to the cabin," he told Sally. "They're raisin' hell because they got in an' didn't find us."

Abe Gibbs laughed. Joe, thinking the man intended to shout for help, clamped his hand over Abe's mouth. The cattleman sputtered and rolled his eyes. But he didn't yell when Joe took his hand away.

Then the Crazy Colt came back, silent as an Indian. He was leading three saddled horses. Joe saw that the horses' hoofs had been covered with gunny sacks. The boy, by every move he made, was branding himself more plainly as a thief. Rustlers covered hoofs that way in order to prevent leaving behind trail sign for following posses.

(Continued on page 124)

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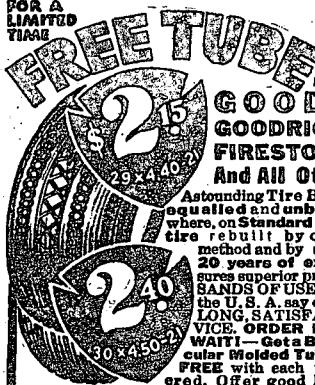
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Dr. T. J. RASTELLI
London Physician

BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 123)

Nor did any of this escape Cayuse McHale. The old man had become strangely silent. He looked at his son, then he turned to Gibbs: "Whatever yuh think," he said, "I wasn't in on it. Nor Sally."

In silence, the party crossed Black Thunder Creek, worked up through the underbrush to where a narrow trail ran down into the black canyon. Sally rode and led a horse. Her father, ignoring his broken leg, had somehow topped the third horse. Gibbs and the Crazy Colt carried Bill Mulvane's tarp. Joe Jones, with the buffalo gun over the crook of his left arm, acted as rear guard.

Reaching a wide shelf on the trail, which a little farther along slanted down between narrow canyon walls, they paused to breathe the horses. Below them, was revealed the McHale clearing. Horsemen were riding between the Cross Ten chuckwagon and the cabin, and the cabin hadn't been set on fire! The column of smoke they had scented, was trailing up from McHale's corral and a stack of wild hay!

"Gibbs!" the old man cried furiously. "When I git outa this, you'll pay dear fer every fork full of hay yore gang burnt."

"Me? And who'll pay for the hosses yore son stole?"

The Crazy Colt said, a bitter smile on his face; "I haven't stole 'em yet, Gibbs. I'll admit we had figured to run off yore stock this mornin'. I got pulled into the deal because I liked to play poker with the gang and they got way ahead of me. I even lost my spurs to 'em. That was yesterday. Then they said we'd run off a bunch of yore hosses an' I'd get revenge an' at the same time easy money to pay my poker debts. When yore men ambushed my dad, it was the spark that set me off."

"I never ordered my men to ambush anyone!" raged Gibbs. "I'm tough, but I'm not a coyote."

"An' no McHale ever stole a hoss!" roared old Cayuse. "If my son did, he's no longer one of the family. You hear that, Gibbs?"

There was the sound of trampling hoofs on the trail above, and the rattle of rocks rolling off the rim into the creek. Back from the walls rang the shrill excited whinnying of ponies stampeding.

A PILGRIM VOLUNTEERS—TO DIE!

"I never stole a hoss," grinned the Crazy Colt, "but here comes the men who tricked me, made a fool outa me. . . ."

AROUND the turn galloped a bunch of rangy ponies, a hundred head of good stock. They were blood sorrels with white blazes down their noses.

Gibbs cursed. "The pick of my band—Kentucky Whip stuff!"

Joe Jones swung aboard a saddle. The Crazy Colt followed. Abe Gibbs was the third man.

"Stay with yore father and Bill!" Joe shouted to Sally McHale as she seized his stirrup leather. Then, with the Crazy Colt leading the wild slide down to the trail where the stolen horses had turned and bunched up, Joe and Gibbs lashed their mounts.

Horsemen darted out of the gray fog, guns hammering. Down on the McHale flat, Cross Ten horsemen heard the echo of war rattling back from rock rims. Cursing, knowing that somehow they had been outwitted, they swung their mounts down through the brush and across the creek.

Abe Gibbs' pony went down with a bullet through its breast. Joe Jones swung his horse in front of it, lined his gun, and knocked a man from leather. But even as Gibbs cursed and struggled to free a leg trapped under his dead horse, men rushed Joe Jones. He couldn't hold them off and his pony was forced to the edge of the cliff. Below was space, a hundred feet of it, with black fangs of rock splitting the white foam of the creek.

With his gun hammering, the Crazy Colt shot his way to Jones' side. Now a horseman galloped around the flank of the blocked pony herd, a man who wore spurs that glittered. . . .

"Yawkey!" Joe Jones shouted, and fired on the man.

"My spurs!" yelled the Crazy Colt, and he charged forward to meet the rustler chief.

Yawkey reined in, and drove a bullet through the Crazy Colt's body. The boy pitched off his pony. As Yawkey whirled to meet Joe's gun, his hat flew off.

"It's not Yawkey," Joe gasped. "It's Walt Flanders!"

(Concluded on page 126)

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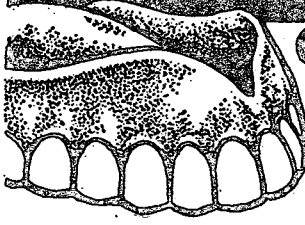
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BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 125)

Flanders' bullet tore the leather off the swell of Joe's saddle. Joe's slug hit the foreman above the belt buckle. As Flanders strained back in agony on his raw-hide reins, his wall-eyed pony, blind with fear, whirled and leaped off the wall, fell like a rock into Black Thunder Creek. . . .

Panting, Joe Jones shortened rein so savagely that red ran from his pony's mouth. But for that, his frightened mount would have followed over the rim.

Cross Ten men came up then, cursing savagely as they told how Flanders had gotten away from them after being rescued from the cabin. He had joined his men and started north with the stolen horses while they had been busy looting the McHale homestead.

Gibbs shook hands gruffly with old Cayuse. "We were both fools," he said. "I'll pay for yore hay. I trusted Flanders an' recommended him to Mulvane, even told Walt the pass words that Mulvane was usin'."

Cayuse and Sally McHale had gone over to where the Crazy Colt lay, bright-eyed and gasping, on the ground. They crouched by his side, and Joe Jones ripped off the lad's shirt.

"A bad wound," he told Sally, "but he's got a fightin' chance. Anyway, he paid back an' more for the shootin' of Bill Mulvane."

The Colt heard and grinned weakly as he whispered, "I didn't shoot him. Walt did. I went out with the buffalo gun to do it, but my nerve didn't hold out on shootin' from ambush. So they took the gun away, cussed me out, and turned the trick. Walt was always turnin' tricks. Like winnin' my spurs at poker, then wearin' 'em to put the blame on me. But I reckon in the end, I—I come through clean?"

"You bet you have," Joe said. "You got the fightin' blood of your family inside that hide of yores. An' you're due for plenty livin', yet." And then turning to the girl he said, "It's a great family, this, McHale bunch. I wonder if, sometime, I could join on?"

And in her bright blue eyes was his answer. . . .

THE END

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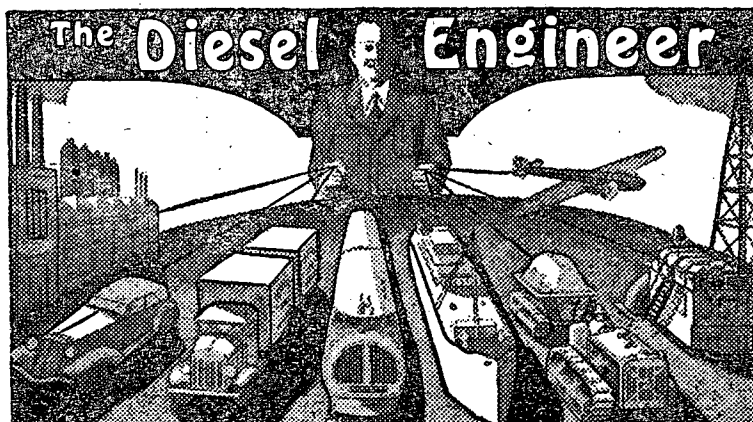
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